CalHHS

MASTER PLAN for Developmental Services

Committee Member Bios

Amy Westling, Executive Director of the Association of Regional Center Agencies (ARCA), joined ARCA in 2012 and has focused on advancing services to meet the unique and evolving needs of the more than 400,000 people statewide who rely on regional center services. Prior to that, she worked for Alta California Regional Center coordinating the movement of individuals with developmental disabilities from institutional to community settings and for Central Valley Regional Center overseeing service coordination for school-aged children in diverse communities. She previously worked as the Clients' Rights Advocate for six counties in the Central Valley. Based on a belief the key role of California's developmental services system is supporting each person to pursue their own person-centered goals, Amy looks forward to this committee recommending strategies to improve access to critical supports across agencies and throughout the lifespan.

AREVA MARTIN, ESQ., is an award-winning civil rights attorney and one of the country's leading influencers shaping the conversation and policy on the intersectionality of race and disability rights.

She started the California based nonprofit, Special Needs Network, Inc., after her son Marty was diagnosed with autism. Under her leadership, the organization has served hundreds of thousands of families, particularly, families of color in low-income communities. She has raised millions of dollars for autism and elevated the issues of disparities in the diagnosis and services of Black autistic children to a national level. As a leading autism advocate, she has helped to shape laws in California and at the national level impacting individuals with disabilities.

From raising awareness of autism to leading a public/private coalition to build the first-ever autism clinic in the heart of one of Los Angeles's most economically underserved communities, Areva has volunteered thousands of hours to support community-based organizations, nonprofits and emerging minority and women-owned businesses.

Beth Burt is the Executive Director of the Autism Society Inland Empire and the co-chair of the Autism Society of California Public Policy Committee. She is inspired every day by her two adult children, one of whom has Autism and the other with behavioral health needs. She has spent the last 26 years of her career dedicated to improving the quality of life for individuals with Autism, first getting her start by volunteering with the Autism Society after her son was newly diagnosed with Autism. Throughout her career, she has served on varying task forces, collaborations on housing, employment, and public policy issues related to Autism. Most recently, she was appointed to the Master Plan for Developmental Services. Beth has not only previously served as the President of the Autism Society of California but also co-authored two books on creating an inclusive classroom for neurodivergent and special needs students.

Brett Eisenberg is the Executive Director of the California Foundation for Independent Living Centers (CFILC) which is the statewide membership association for Independent Living Centers in California. Brett began his role at CFILC in March 2023. Prior to his current position Brett spent fourteen years running the second largest Independent Living Center in New York City. Brett's career in disability advocacy started in the corporate world at American International Group (AIG) where he led global disability initiatives for several years. As an individual with multiple disabilities Brett understands the importance of effective service delivery and fully believes in person centered services.

Brian Zotti is the President and CEO of Options For All, an organization that provides services to adults with disabilities throughout California. Having family members who directly benefit from these services, Brian possesses a deep understanding of the state's system, recognizing its strengths and the significant possibilities for its enhancement to ensure accessibility, equity, and comprehensiveness. With a robust background that spans over 25 years, Brian has led extensive and varied operations in the for-profit, nonprofit, and private sectors. He holds a Bachelor of Arts from The College of William and Mary and has attained certifications as a Six Sigma Greenbelt, and in project management and operations management. Committed to the principle that everyone is entitled to live a life without limits, Brian advocates for transformative approaches that expand opportunities and foster inclusion for all.

Claudia Center is the Legal Director at Disability Rights Education and Defense Fund (DREDF) and has more than 25 years of experience working in disability rights. She litigates cases that increase civil rights and civil liberties for persons with disabilities, and represents the disability community in legislative, policy, amicus, and appellate work. Claudia has lived experience as a person with a mental health disability and is the parent to an adult child with developmental disabilities. She has represented individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities and worked on the campaign to pass AB 1663 (The Probate Conservatorship Reform and Supported Decision-Making Act). She believes that publicly funded services for people with disabilities should be accessible, equitable, and transparent.

Edith Arias is a mother of a 32-year-old man who qualifies for various developmental services to support him to be more independent. She is a bilingual and bicultural immigrant from México. Her experience as a special education teacher for students in the transition program (18 to 22 years old) has inspired her to join different boards that advocate for the needs of families and their children with extensive support needs. She participates in advocacy in her community and other organizations that support individuals with diverse developmental needs like CalTASH. She co-found a Spanish speaking parent support group in her community for families who had children served by their local regional center. Edith has served at the Golden Gate Regional Center Board of Directors since 2018 and knows of the importance of diversifying the stories that are heard so that ALL voices can be heard.

Elena Tiffany is an autistic and epileptic self-advocate involved in multiple local and state-wide self-advocacy groups, such as the Self-Advocacy Board of Los Angeles County (SABLAC) and the Department of Developmental Services' Consumer Advisory Committee (DDS CAC). As a consumer with North Los Angeles County Regional Center (NLACRC) and the Department of Rehabilitation (DOR), as well as being a self-determination program (SDP) participant, she has lived experience with multiple disability services. She is passionate about finding and utilizing resources and opportunities for adults with disabilities, particularly in the areas of healthcare, employment, and housing. She considers herself a foodie and enjoys going out in the community to explore new things to do and places to eat.

Eric Ramirez is a Seasonal Clerk at the Department of Public Social Services (DPSS). In the last 4 years, he has worked in the Department of Rehabilitation (DOR), Department of Corrections and now DPSS. Initially diagnosed with Autism at 18 months of age, he is now on the Advisory Board for Easter Seals, a consumer of DOR and Inland Regional Center and volunteers at Autism events in the Inland Empire near his home.

He's made great strides in finding ways to share his talents through modelling, hand-made Halloween costumes, drawing different art pieces, and YouTube videos. He's currently a Junior at California State University, Fullerton (CSUF) with a major in Art, with an emphasis in Animation.

Despite a lot of tough times in life, he manages to pick himself back up and find new ways to work through different situations. He aspires to continue his hobbies and wants to work at an animation studio one day, maybe The Walt Disney Company.

Eric has continuously come up with ideas and creations he knows can work, and with enough support, time, patience, and effort on his part, and they've changed the course of his life. He knows that with enough creativity, time, and effort from anyone, we can make our boring world a little less boring.

Fernando Gomez is a senior executive specializing in emerging markets and technologies, boasting over 30 years of experience in business development, custom business solutions, and market positioning. An industry expert in multicultural marketing, with a particular emphasis on the Hispanic Market, Mr. Gomez has been invited to speak at numerous domestic and international conferences and seminars on topics related to the development of the multi-channel and television industry, as well as cultural and ethnic diversity.

He has held senior positions at top corporations, including Univision/Galavision (Televisa), Bravo Networks, Microsoft (MSNLatino), France Telecom (Starmedia), impreMedia (La Opinion), and Maya Entertainment as Vice-President, Emerging Markets. Mr. Gomez is passionate about equality for all and is an avid advocate for individuals with special needs. He is the Co-Founder and Chief Vision Officer of the Integrated Community Collaborative (ICC) and Co-Founder of Disability Voices United (DVU), where he serves as Vice-President of the Board of Directors.

He resides on the West Side of Los Angeles with his wife, Elizabeth, and their sons, seventeen-year-old Oscar Antonio, who is served by the Westside Regional Center, and fifteen-year-old Diego Antonio.

Joe Perales is an accomplished professional with over 40 years of experience in the field of intellectual and developmental disabilities. As the Director of El Arc de California, Joe plays a vital role in driving initiatives that empower and organize community efforts to address issues related to equity, inclusion, and equality for individuals with disabilities in California. He is highly respected for his unwavering commitment to serving the needs of the Latino disability community and has been honored to be a part of the master plan committee. In this role, he represents the Latino disability community and has the opportunity to impact the creation of a better system for all. Joe's expertise and dedication to the cause have made him an inspiration to many in the field and beyond.

Joe Perales es un profesional con más de 40 años de experiencia en el campo de las discapacidades intelectuales del desarrollo. Como Director de El Arc de California, Joe desempeña un papel vital en el impulso de iniciativas que empoderan y organizan los esfuerzos comunitarios para abordar cuestiones relacionadas con la equidad, la inclusión y la igualdad para las personas con discapacidades en California. Es muy respetado por su compromise inquebrantable de atender las necesidades de la comunidad Latina con discapacidades y ha tenido el honor de ser parte del comité del plan maestro. En este cargo, representa a la comunidad Latina con discapacidades y tiene la oportunidad de impactar la creación de un mejor sistema para todos. La experiencia y la dedicación de Joe a la causa lo han convertido en una inspiración para muchos en el campo y más allá.

Joyce McNair was appointed to the California State Council on Developmental Disabilities (SCDD) by Governor Gavin Newsom. A strong advocate for the person-centered planning process and affordable housing, she has served on SCDD's Sacramento Regional Advisory Committee and the Self-Determination Advisory Committee for Alta California Regional Center. Currently she serves on Department of Developmental Services Community Resources and Regional Center Performance Measures workgroups and participates in related focus groups. Her previous work history and advocacy includes several areas in which she still has great interest: youth services, alternative affordable housing solutions, and neighborhood stabilization initiatives. Previously she spent many years in local, state, and national public affairs. Ms. McNair has three adult children. Her youngest receives regional center services and thrives in the Self-Determination Program.

Judy Mark is President of Disability Voices United, an organization directed by people with disabilities and families who advocate for choice, meaningful outcomes, equity and accountability. Judy has helped lead efforts in California to enact several disability rights laws including a probate conservatorship reform and supported decision-making law in 2022 and a self-determination law in 2013. Judy has spoken widely before varied audiences and appeared extensively in the media about disability issues including on NBC News, the *LA Times,* and NPR, and was featured in the ABC-10 investigative series "The Price of Care" about conservatorships. Judy is also a faculty member at UCLA in Disability Studies, and co-led the Autism Media Lab that produced documentary films about inclusion. Judy has a bachelor's degree in communications from UCLA and a Master's degree in politics and public policy from the Eagleton Institute of Politics at Rutgers University. Her prior experience includes over 30 years with national policy organizations, most extensively focusing on immigrant and refugee rights. Judy lives in Los Angeles and has a 27-year-old son, Joshua, who has autism and recently moved into his own home with his younger sister and staff.

Kavita Sreedhar is a co-founder of a non profit organization called PRAGNYA that works towards "Neurodiversity Acceptance and Acculturation". PRAGNYA which literally means a very heightened sense of awareness and mindfulness, brings together the neuro-majority and neuro minority worlds, training neuro-majority individuals to be Allies of those that are in the neuro minority (those with developmental differences). An Empathetic Ally of anyone who is different, Kavita's ability to accept and find joy in the essence of each person opens the door for them to connect, engage and thrive. Kavita attributes her Allyship mentality to her late Mother, Mahima who had conceptualized the work of the organization PRAGNYA and also her relentless drive to make it a welcoming and accepting world for all, to her beautiful and feisty 18-year-old neurominority daughter. Kavita is a Person Centered Planner, Independent Facilitator and Self Determination Coach who also serves on the Regional Advisory Committee of the Central Coast, and as the Co-chair on the Self Determination Advisory Committee at the San Andreas Regional Center. She also is an active member of the Disparity of Services and Equity of access task force in the Bay Area, while advocating relentlessly for the underserved minority, immigrant communities and the neuro-minority self advocates lacking natural circles of support. A much loved Radio Anchor of a South Asian Radio Network, Radio Dehotties and a passionate Ally, Friend, Mentor of many a neurominority individual and family, Kavita's guiding mantra in life is, "Together, we ALL win!"

Kecia Weller is an accomplished Disability Justice Activist that has worked in the Disabilities Rights field for more than 30 years. Her current advocacy work is with Master Plan Committee and the UCLA Tarjan Center. She has served on the State Council on Developmental Disabilities, where she was appointed to be the SCDD Employment First Committee Chair and assisted in the enactment of the Employment First Law. Ms. Weller served on the California State Rehabilitation Council and also has given her expertise to the California Department of Aging: Long Term Care Ombudsman Program. Ms. Weller is a nationally recognized Abuse Awareness/Prevention Advocate. Here is a hyperlink to a Public Service Announcement that Ms. Weller co-produced: https://youtu.be/yhLsATwO0o4. This PSA for Abuse Prevention had over 33,000 views on it. She also was a co-creator of the 7-year WITH Foundation funded Talk About Sexual Violence (https://thearc.org/our-initiatives/criminal-justice/talk-about-sexual-violence/). Ms. Weller is quite fond of mentoring other people with disabilities to be outstanding leaders in the civil rights movements for disabilities.

Kelly Kulzer-Reyes has taught English, English as a Second Language, and Disability Services at Taft College since 2007. Kelly has been active in disability-connected advocacy since the birth of her daughter, Amelia, in 2012. Passionate about California's Self Determination Program (SDP), Kelly leads learning circles for people learning to navigate SDP to further the program's success. She and her family are active at Club 21 Learning and Resource Center and Kern Down Syndrome Network.

Dr. Larry Yin, MD, MSPH, leads the Division of General Pediatrics at Children's Hospital Los Angeles, overseeing strategic planning, recruitment, and program development, integrating training and research into clinical services. Dr. Yin, certified in general pediatrics and developmental-behavioral pediatrics, also directs the University Center of Excellence in Developmental Disabilities and serves on the State Council on Developmental Disabilities. His research, funded by major institutions, focuses on neurodevelopmental disorders and health disparities. Dr. Yin is recognized for his teaching excellence, research, and dedication to improving outcomes for children with disabilities.

My name is Lisa Cooley and I'm a person who has cerebral palsy who is a very active member of several different developmental disability organizations. I am a two-time former governor appointee of the State Council on Developmental Disabilities. Being a member of the Master Plan for Developmental Disabilities is important to me because it allows me to help people who have developmental disabilities like me now and in the future to have a voice in decision making for our service system. I am a long-time resident of Sacramento.

Marie Kanne Poulsen, PhD is Professor of Clinical Pediatrics at the Keck School of Medicine, University of Southern California and is Chief Psychologist of the Division of General Pediatrics at Children's Hospital Los Angeles. Her work centers on supporting families to build resilience in infants and young children at-risk due to biological and psycho-social circumstance, including developmental delays, chronic illness, perinatal substance exposure, maternal depression, out-of-home placement, domestic violence and the stresses of poverty. Currently, she has a Governor's appointment as Chair of the State Interagency Coordinating Council on Early Intervention.

Mark serves as the Executive Director of the San Diego Regional Center (SDRC). He was appointed to the position by the Board of Directors on November 1, 2021. SDRC serves over 42,000 individuals in San Diego and Imperial counties with over 900 employees.

Mark has over 40 years senior level executive experience operating and developing person centered service options for individuals with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities.

Mark is a graduate of the University of Illinois and attended the prestigious Stanford Executive Program for Nonprofit Leaders. He lives in San Diego with Angie, his wife of 37 years.

Mark Melanson, Chief Executive Officer, California Community Living Network. Mark is originally from the North Shore Area of Massachusetts. He has been working with people with disabilities since 1985 and has an Associate's Degree in Human Services specializing in Counseling Psychology. In the span of his career, he has worked in institutions, group homes, and 1:1 inclusionary and fully integrated settings. He has worked in a variety of settings in this field including Direct Care, Physical Therapy Aide, Recreational Therapy, Adult Day Programs, Inclusion Specialist, Family Support, Intensive Family Support, Respite Care worker, Employment, Community Services based programs and in Non-Profit Senior Management positions. After relocating to California in 2001 and working for a large Bay Area service provider for 18 years Mark became the first paid staff for the California Community Living network as the Chief Executive Officer in 2019.

Norma Ramos is the Immediate Past Chair of the San Diego Regional Center. She has a B.A. in International Business with an emphasis in Spanish and Latin America from San Diego State University. She left her career to become a full time caregiver to her adult son experiencing I/DD with high support needs. Norma is an alumni of the San Diego Leadership Education in Neurodevelopmental and other Related Disabilities (San Diego LEND). San Diego LEND is administered through UC San Diego and is part of the Association of University Centers on Disabilities (AUCD). Her past work as a bilingual, bicultural promotora for underserved families in San Diego allowed her to share her lived experience with families by empowering them to advocate for their loved ones. The work with this committee is important to her because it allows her to share her perspective as a Spanish speaking, Latina parent, with other leaders in the Disability Service System.

Sara Speck is a North Bay Reginal Center client living a full and successful life. She has worked at the Vacaville Safeway for 18 years as the Head Courtesy Clerk and helps to train new employees. She also volunteered four days a week at the Larsen Center in Vacaville for over 15 years where she was a Pre-school Para Educator working with special needs kids. Sara has been on NBRC Board of Directors representing Solano County for the past six years, serving as the Board Secretary for two years and recently voted in as the Board Vice President for her last year. As a board member, her unique input is heard, shared, and inspiring to those living in today's society with special needs. She is also actively involved with the Client Advisory Committee (CAC) and has been acting co-chairman since 2019. She wants to help ensure self-advocates have the opportunities to be leaders in their own lives and with their own services. She is excited about being on this committee and helping make a change for so many people that deserve to live their best life, including herself!

Sascha Bittner, who is quadriplegic with a speech disability as a result of cerebral palsy, is a member of the National Council on Disability (appointed by then Speaker Pelosi) and serves on its Executive Committee as Governance Chair. She has a B.A. in Social Welfare from UC Berkeley and is president of the San Francisco In-Home Supportive Services Public Authority Governing Board, a Mayor Breed appointee to the Disability and Aging Commission, a member of the national steering committee and local chapter of Hand-in-Hand, the Domestic Employers Network, and past chair of the California State Council on Developmental Disabilities. She is also past co-chair and current member of the Golden Gate Regional Center Self Determination Local Advisory Committee. She believes in breaking down barriers so that all people with developmental disabilities and their families have the knowledge and resources from the regional Center to live and thrive in the community. She has had over 30 years of experience in disability activism sphere.

Shella Comin-DuMong, Director of the Coalition for Housing Accessibility, Needs, Choices, and Equality (CHANCE Housing), has over 25-years' experience providing an array of person-centered Housing Access Services that address the long term affordable, accessible housing needs of persons/families with developmental and other disabilities, older Californians, and people with medical and behavioral health needs. Shella is also the mom of Simone, who has Down Syndrome, and she has been involved with the Department of Developmental Services and regional centers for 33-years. Shella believes that all people deserve a place they can truly call home, and that is achievable when four things come together:

- Person-centered housing access services
- Community-based affordable and accessible housing units
- Rental subsidies, and
- Residential in-home supports and other sustaining services

It is Shella's life work to make this a reality in California in a just, equitable, diverse, and inclusive way.

Sylvia Yeh, a licensed clinical social worker, serves as the Executive Director of Friends of Children with Special Needs. With over 20 years of dedication in the developmental services and social work sector, Sylvia is committed to developing holistic programs for the underprivileged populations, advocating for racial and social justice, seeking solutions to decrease cultural inequity and service disparity, promoting civil engagements, and building a brighter future for them. She is dedicated to empowering the individuals with developmental disabilities and families to make decisions for their lives, direct the care and services based on their preferences, live out their best through support, and be included and treated with respect in the community.

Tiffany Whiten is Senior Government Relations Advocate for the California State Council of Service Employees (SEIU CA), which represents over 700,000 working people in California, over 4,000 of which are direct service providers (DSP) and Regional Center workers.

Ms. Whiten has been with SEIU California for nine years. During this time, Ms. Whiten has helped on matters affecting a wide range of workers in every sector of government including but not limited to, long term care, which consists of In-Home Support Services (IHSS), Skilled Nursing Facilities (SNFs), and Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities (IDD).

Ms. Whiten has the pleasure to not only advocate for workers within the IDD community but also to advocate on behalf of her niece and nephew that receive services from Regional Center of the East Bay. Ms. Whiten is especially proud of her advocacy efforts to increase funding to DSP and service coordinators at Regional Centers.

Will Leiner is a Managing Attorney with Disability Rights California (DRC), California's federally mandated Protection and Advocacy system. In this role, he supports the work of DRC's Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities Practice Group, which specializes in California's Lanterman Act and in protecting and advancing the rights of people served by regional centers. Throughout his 17-year career at DRC, Will has tirelessly worked at the intersection of legal representation and public policy, advocating for systemic changes that enable people with disabilities to get the supports they need to lead lives of their own design. This work is also personal him. Will is a sibling. His brother is served by the developmental services system and is someone who, after being forced into group homes and institutions earlier in his life, now lives in a home of his own with supported living services.

Yvette Baptiste, Ph.D., Director of the Eastern Los Angeles Family Resource Center (ELAFRC) and Immediate Past Chair of the Family Resource Centers Network of CA (FRCNCA) has 38 years of experience in the Developmental Disabilities Service System in almost every role. She is a clinical psychologist, with a specialization in disability, community, and cultural psychology. She is the mother of 3 children who have special healthcare, behavioral, and developmental needs. She has provided direct service in Early Intervention, Adult Services, and Foster Care. Dr. Baptiste and her team at ELAFRC support individuals and families in Los Angeles County navigate the maze of services for their children with special health care and developmental needs. As an immigrant and daughter of a woman with a disability, she is particularly sensitive to understanding issues of those who face economic and institutional bias when trying to access the services and supports most important to the pursuit of their freedom, hopes, and dreams.