

2026 NE CASA CONFERENCE PROGRAM

 **Date: August 21-22, 2026**

 **Venue: Graduate Lincoln Hotel - 141 N 9th St.**

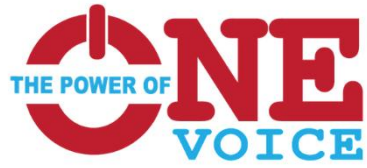
Program Schedule

FRIDAY, AUGUST 21ST

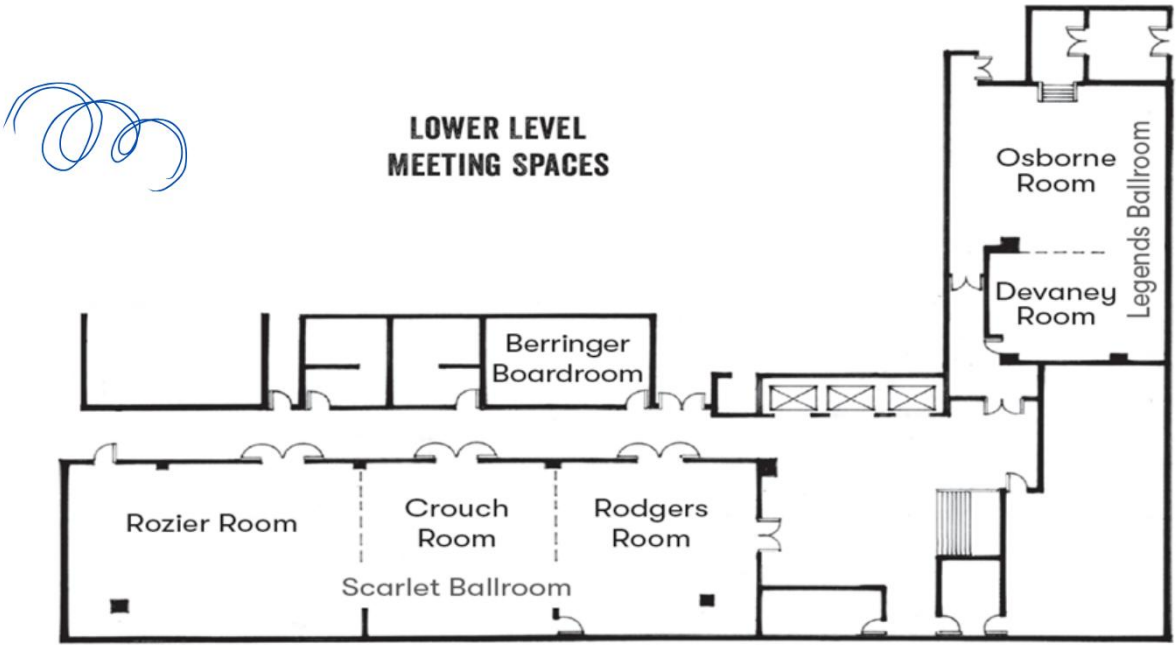
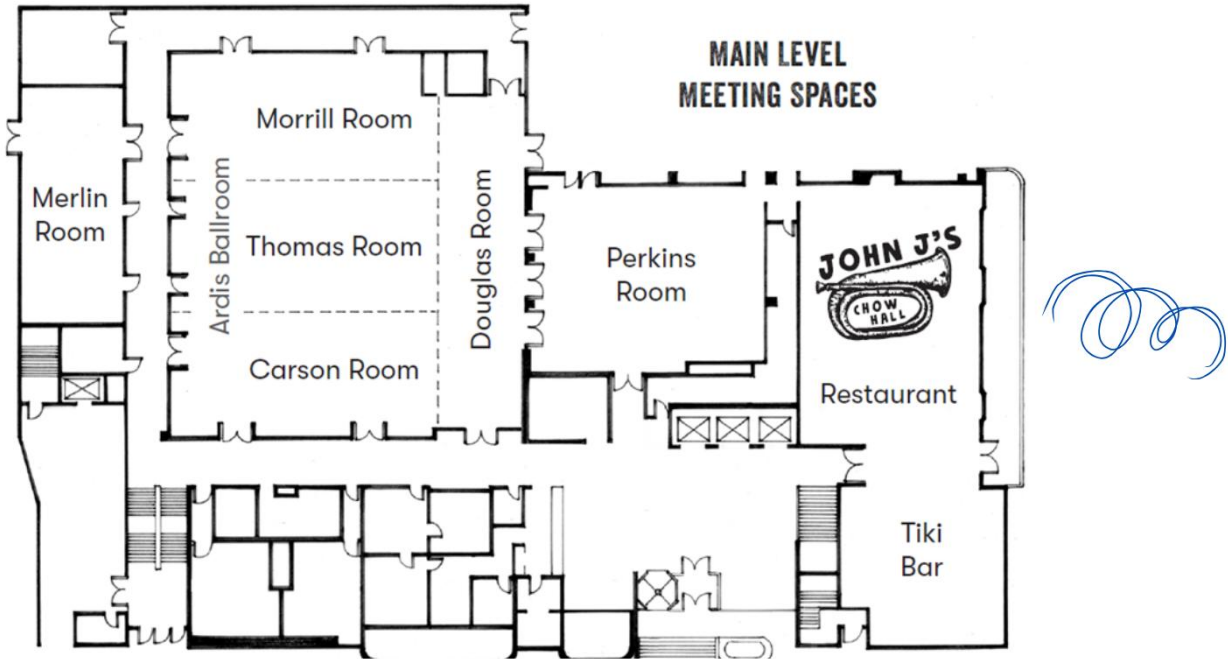
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| 9:00 AM - 6:00 PM | Conference Check-In Main Lobby |
| 10:00 AM - 4:30 PM | CASA Executive Director Meeting - Osborne Room |
| 10:00 AM - 12:45 PM | CASA Staff Meeting Devaney Room |
| 12:30 PM - 6:00 PM | Visit Exhibitors - Perkins CASA Store - Merlin |
| 1 PM - 2 PM | NEW- Session Breakout 1 |
| 2:15- 3:15 PM | NEW- Session Breakout 2 |
| 3:30-4:30 PM | NEW- Session Breakout 3 |
| 4:40 PM - 5:40 PM | CasaManager's Mobile App for Volunteers - Devaney |
| 5:45 PM - 8:30 PM | Welcome Reception, and Music Bingo - Ardis |

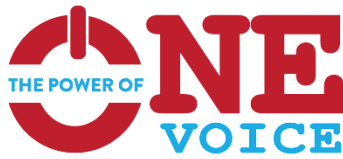
SATURDAY, AUGUST 22ND

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| 7:30 AM - 9:00 AM | Registration, Coffee & Breakfast Snacks - Ardis |
| 8:00 AM - 9:00 AM | CasaManager's Mobile App for Volunteers - Devaney |
| 8:00 AM - 4:30 PM | Visit Exhibitors - Perkins CASA Store - Merlin |
| 9:00 AM - 9:45 AM | Conference Opening & Keynote - Ardis |
| 10AM -11AM | Session Breakout 1 |
| 11:15 AM - 12:15 PM | Session Breakout 2 |
| 12:30 PM - 1:45 PM | Luncheon Awards & Keynote - Ardis |
| 2 PM - 3 PM | Session Breakout 3 |
| 3:15 PM - 4:15 PM | Panel & Conference Wrap Up - Ardis |



Venue Map





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Family Services



Our Valued Exhibitors

OUR EXHIBITORS ARE A VITAL PART OF OUR COMMUNITY, AND WE ARE SO GRATEFUL FOR THEIR SUPPORT! PLEASE TAKE A MOMENT BETWEEN SESSIONS TO STOP BY, SAY HELLO, AND EXPLORE THE WONDERFUL RESOURCES THEY'VE BROUGHT TO SHARE WITH US. LET'S SHOW THEM SOME LOVE!



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Family Services

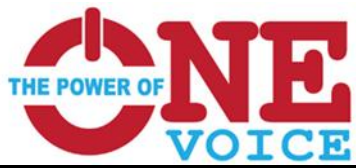
| Day 1 Friday, August 21, 2026 | | |
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| 9:00am - 6:00pm Main Lobby | Conference Check-In Open Welcome. Please collect your nametag and conference program at the welcome desk. |  |
| 10:00am - 4:30pm Osborne Room | CASA Executive Director Meeting Welcome all CASA directors to this meeting focused on enhancing local programs and fostering professional networking. |  |
| 10:00am – 12:45pm Devaney Room | CASA Staff Meeting All CASA staff are cordially invited to this meeting, which aims to facilitate professional networking and strengthen connections. |  |
| 1:00pm – 6:00pm | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Visiting Exhibitor Booths - Perkins Room • Visiting CASA Store - Merlin Room |  |
| 1:00pm – 2:00pm | <p>New Pre-Conference, Session Breakout 1:</p> <p>A. Rodgers Room</p> <p>A. Brain Architecture Game Overview, Christy Prang, MBA A hands-on game demonstrating how early life experiences impact brain development, stress, and resilience. The Brain Architecture Game lets participants build a model brain, showing how positive and stressful events shape brain structure and long-term outcomes. Participants use cards and materials to represent protective factors and stressors, revealing the lasting effects of early experiences and the importance of support. Participants reflect on their journey, connecting the activity to real-world systems and understanding how resilience can be fostered.</p> <p>B. Rozier Room</p> <p>B. Working with Parent Attorneys as Non-Attorney Professionals, Laura Lowe, P.C. This session focuses on building collaborative partnerships between attorneys and non-attorney professionals to enhance legal representation for parents, particularly in child welfare cases. Participants learn to define roles, share strategies for gathering data, and implement team-based advocacy to protect parental rights and improve outcomes for children.</p> | <div style="text-align: center;">  </div> <p>A. Christy Prang is the Director of Training & Community Engagement at BraveBe Child Advocacy Center, advocating child welfare since 2015. She also teaches child advocacy as an Adjunct Professor at NE Wesleyan University.</p> <p>B. Laura Lowe, P.C. With decades of experience serving as a GAL and Parent Attorney in NE, she brings both deep knowledge and compassionate insight into juvenile court cases.</p> |


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| <p>C. Crouch Room</p>  <p>C. Sarah Cruz is the Youth Program and Prevention Coordinator at UNL's Center on Children, Families, and the Law and a Certified Social Worker. She joined CCFL in November 2023, focusing on youth homelessness initiatives.</p> | <p>C. Youth Homelessness in Nebraska: Understanding Risks, Prevalence, and Pathways to Support, Angela R Gebhardt, MFS, MSW & Sarah Cruz</p> <p>This session offers a foundational exploration of youth homelessness in Nebraska.</p> <p>Participants will examine the scope and prevalence of youth homelessness, identify the most common risk factors that contribute to this issue, and learn about the range of services and resources currently available to support homeless youth across the state. The training also highlights systemic challenges and opportunities for positive change within Nebraska's homeless youth system, empowering attendees to better support and advocate for young people, including those with lived experience—who are navigating homelessness.</p> |  <p>C. Angela R, Gebhardt, is the Lived Experience Coordinator for the Youth Homeless Systems Improvement grant, where she established Youth Action Boards in Nebraska. She also trains others on domestic violence and child welfare.</p> |
| <p>2:00pm – 2:15pm</p> | <p>Break</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Perkins/Merlin Room |
| <p>2:15pm - 3:15pm</p> <p>A. Rodgers Room</p> | <p>New Pre-Conference, Session Breakout 2:</p> <p>A. Trauma 101 Overview, Libby Valerio-Boster</p> <p>Exploring Adverse Childhood Experiences & Resilience. This training provides a comprehensive exploration of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACES), examining their impact on individuals and communities.</p> <p>Participants will gain a deeper understanding of the various types of ACES, their prevalence and the potential long-term consequences as well as learn strategies to promote resilience and prevent trauma.</p> <p>The training emphasizes the importance of wellness for professionals working with individuals impacted by ACES.</p> |  <p>A. Libby Valerio-Boster serves as the ACES Training Specialist at BraveBe Child Advocacy Center. She holds a degree in Community Health and Wellness and is committed to advancing awareness of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) and their implications for public health. Through research-informed training, she supports professionals & communities.</p> |

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| <p>B. Rozier Room</p> | <p>B. Strengthening Child Advocacy Through Collaboration, Investigator Lynette Russell</p> <p>This session will highlight how our Special Victims Unit partners across disciplines provide personalized, trauma-informed services to children and families. Attendees will learn how referrals are initiated through law enforcement to collaborate with child protective services, schools, domestic violence programs, child advocacy centers, the county attorney's office, and other programs within the community. How each case moves through a coordinated response that includes forensic interviews, medical evaluations, victim advocacy, counseling resources, and ongoing family support will be discussed. The presentation will explain how multidisciplinary team members collaborate to reduce trauma and improve outcomes and share practical strategies that can be adapted in communities of any size. Participants will leave with actionable ideas on building or strengthening cross-agency partnerships, improving referral pathways, and becoming active partners in child advocacy efforts while working with law enforcement in your jurisdiction.</p> |  <p>B. Lynette Russell holds a bachelor's degree in criminal justice and a master's degree in forensic science. During 27 years with the Lincoln Police Department, she has served roles including patrol; Special Victims Unit investigator; criminal investigator, School Resource Officer; and Domestic Violence investigator.</p> |
| <p>C. Crouch Room</p> | <p>C. When Addiction Affects the Family: Understanding the Impact on Children, Sarah Kirkwood LIMHP, LADC, IMH-E®</p> <p>This session examines how parental substance use impacts children's emotional health, behavior, and development.</p> <p>Participants will gain an understanding of common challenges children may experience and learn strategies for supporting resilience and healthy family relationships.</p> |  <p>C. Sarah Kirkwood is a therapist and owner of Institute for Resilience, specializing in infant mental health, families, and trauma. With 11+ years of clinical practice and 15+ years in child welfare, she is an Infant Mental Health Clinical Mentor and adjunct professor in Doane University's Master of Counseling Program.</p> |

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| 3:15pm – 3:30pm | Break | • Perkins/Merlin Room |
| <p data-bbox="203 275 435 306">3:30pm – 4:30pm</p> <p data-bbox="203 342 451 373">A. Rodgers Room</p> <p data-bbox="203 846 423 877">B. Rozier Room</p>  <p data-bbox="203 1115 472 1879">B. Alex Araya, began his immigration law career in 2017 by helping launch the Medical Legal Partnership between OneWorld Community Health Centers and CIRA, formerly the Immigrant Legal Center, connecting noncitizens experiencing health harming legal needs with immigration legal services. Alex served as a staff attorney at the Amica Center for Immigrant Rights in Washington, DC.</p> | <p data-bbox="503 275 1089 306">New Pre-Conference, Session Breakout 3:</p> <p data-bbox="503 342 1062 407">A. Minimal Facts Interviewing Overview, Aubrey Yost, MSW</p> <p data-bbox="503 443 1146 674">Children often choose to disclose to an adult they trust and feel safe with. If we are that trusted adult, what do we do next? How we respond after a child’s disclosure profoundly impacts the child and any potential criminal case that may follow. It is crucial we know what questions to ask and when to stop.</p> <p data-bbox="503 846 1018 911">B. Immigration 101 for Child Welfare Professionals, Alex Araya, Attorney</p> <p data-bbox="503 947 1089 1077">This introductory session on immigration provides a basic framework of the U.S. legal system, specifically focusing on pathways for vulnerable youth.</p> <p data-bbox="503 1115 1141 1245">This session will highlight Special Immigrant Juvenile Status (SIJS) as a key humanitarian protection while outlining broader safety planning and preparation strategies.</p> |  <p data-bbox="1166 543 1536 1209">A. Aubrey Yost, MSW, is the Training & Outreach Coordinator at BraveBe Child Advocacy Center and has worked there for over a decade. She previously served as a Family Advocate and Anti-Trafficking & Exploitation Specialist, supporting children, youth, and families through advocacy, education, and systems navigation. She has professional expertise and lived experience as a survivor to deliver authentic, trauma-informed education that inspires connection and meaningful change.</p> |

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| <p>C. Crouch Room</p> | <p>C. Family Finding: A Pivotal Role in Team Collaborating, Advocating and Connecting Families, Lynnette Otero</p> <p>Discover how and why the NE Department of Health and Human Services division of Children and Family Services places an emphasis on locating and connecting families.</p> <p>Learn what the Family Finding Team does and how it supports the DHHS mission of Helping People Live Better Lives.</p> <p>Hear statistics and details on the different services the Family Finding team offers to the Child and Family Services Specialists. See Genograms / Family Trees and how the team investigates locating additional family members along with their contact information.</p> |  <p>C. Lynnette Otero is a Child/Family Services Specialist Supervisor with the Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services, where she supervises the Family Finding Team. She holds a BSW from the University of Nebraska and has served as an ongoing caseworker and permanency worker. Her work focuses on identifying and engaging relatives to strengthen family connections and support safe, timely permanency.</p> |
| <p>4:40pm – 5:40pm</p> <p>Devaney Room</p> | <p>Sunlight, CasaManager’s New Mobile App for Volunteers, Gina James</p> <p>Step into Sunlight: Secure Collaboration for CASA Volunteers. Discover Sunlight — the secure app that complements CasaManager, powered by Sunlight.</p> <p>Sunlight makes it easy for CASA volunteers to track time and activities, collaborate in real time, and communicate securely with the children’s treatment team, parents, other family members, placement providers, and your CASA supervisor.</p> <p>Sunlight reduces paperwork and keeps your focus where it belongs: advocating for the children you serve! Attend this session for a hands-on look at this powerful, user-friendly tool built to support your advocacy.</p> |  <p>Gina A. James is CasaManager’s Account Manager and Lead Trainer, supporting CASA programs nationwide with training, support, and strategic guidance. She has extensive experience in dependency and neglect case supervision, staff development, volunteer support, and interagency collaboration. She holds a B.S. in Business.</p> |











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| <p>5:45pm – 8:30pm</p> <p>Ardis Ballroom</p> | <p>Opening Reception, Welcome, and Music Bingo</p> <p>The 2026 Nebraska CASA Association Conference will begin with an opening reception for all conference attendees on Friday evening.</p> <p>Attendees are warmly invited to connect with colleagues while enjoying a relaxed and welcoming atmosphere, a cash bar, beverages, and a selection of delicious bites showcasing some of Lincoln’s best local offerings.</p> <p>As you step into the Ardis Ballroom, please feel free to make yourself at home. Help yourself to a delicious buffet, settle into your table, and enjoy.</p> <p>Elliott Piper of The Music Bingo People will host an upbeat round of Music Bingo, featuring a crowd-pleasing mix of favorites. Guests are encouraged to sing along, enjoy a few laughs, and take part for a chance to win a gift basket in a spirited, friendly competition.</p> <p>The Graduate Hotel, the NE CASA Association Conference Committee, and the Lincoln Visitors Bureau look forward to welcoming you and extending Nebraska hospitality at the opening reception.</p> |  <p>Elliott Piper, The Music Bingo People</p> |
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Meet Our 2026 Nebraska CASA Conference Planning Team:

- Amanda Conradt, Senior Volunteer Coordinator at CASA for Lancaster County
- Brandi Klaassen, Volunteer Coordinator at Southeast NE CASA
- Christina Millsap, Training Director at Nebraska CASA Association
- Cindy Reed, NE CASA Board Member
- Corrie Kielty, Executive Director at Nebraska CASA Association
- Debbie Green, Director at SENCA CASA
- Happy Aldana, Executive Director at CASA of the Midlands
- Jodi Richards, CASA Volunteer Supervisor at Kearney/Buffalo County CASA
- Krista Bruns, Executive Director at PlainsWest CASA
- Kristi Morrow, Associate Director of CASA for Lancaster County
- Linda Shaw, Executive Director at Dawson/Gosper County CASA
- Margot Icenogle-Larsen, Executive Director at Kearney/Buffalo County CASA
- Mindy Bieck, CASA Volunteer at Sarpy County CASA
- Sarah Mundil, CFS Learning & Development Supervisor
- Shelby Pedersen, Executive Director at Southeast NE CASA
- Tammie Stolz, Operations Coordinator at Nebraska CASA Association

| Day 2 Saturday, August 22, 2026 | | |
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| 7:30am - 9:00am Ardis Ballroom | Registration, Coffee & Continental Breakfast Welcome. Please collect your nametag and conference program at the welcome desk. | |
| 8:00am – 9:00am Devaney Room | Sunlight, CasaManager’s New Mobile App for Volunteers, Gina James Step into Sunlight: Secure Collaboration for CASA Volunteers. Discover Sunlight — the secure app that complements CasaManager, powered by Sunlight. Sunlight makes it easy for CASA volunteers to track time and activities, collaborate in real time, and communicate securely with the children’s treatment team, parents, other family members, placement providers, and your CASA supervisor. Sunlight reduces paperwork and keeps your focus where it belongs: advocating for the children you serve! Attend this session for a hands-on look at this powerful, user-friendly tool built to support your advocacy. | Gina A. James is CasaManager’s Account Manager and Lead Trainer, supporting CASA programs nationwide with training, support, and strategic guidance. She has extensive experience in dependency case supervision, staff development, volunteer support, and collaboration. She holds a B.S. in Business. |
| 8:00am - 4:30pm | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Visiting Exhibitor Booths - Perkins Room • Visiting CASA Store - Merlin Room | |
| 9:00am – 9:45am Ardis Ballroom Corrie Kielty , NE CASA Executive Director, MC | Conference Opening & Jenn McNally, Keynote We hope you’ll join us for a warm welcome from Corrie Kielty, Nebraska CASA Executive Director, and a meaningful and engaging keynote with Jen McNally, as she brings her timely message— Better. Together. — to life. Let’s be honest: most "teamwork" sessions feel like a group project where you end up doing all the work, or a meeting that could have been a very short email. It’s time to stop treating collaboration like a 'have to' and move to the power of 'get to.' In Better. Together , it’s about working smarter, avoiding the hero-complex burnout, and realizing that none of us is as smart—or as funny—as ALL of us! | Jen McNally is a national speaker and Director of Mental Health & Wellness with 20+ years of experience in residential, outpatient, and educational settings. She oversees mental health programming for students and educators across Nebraska ESUs. |

| 9:45am – 10:00am | Break | Perkins/Merlin Room |
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| <p>10:00am - 11:00am</p> <p>A. Rodgers Room</p> <p>B. Rozier Room</p>  <p>B. Thomas Threlkeld - As both a child welfare professional and a lived expert, Thomas brings over 20 years of expertise to the field, with a primary focus on adoption and foster care. He serves as a trainer and curriculum designer/developer at Spaulding for Children.</p> <p>C. Crouch Room</p>  <p>C. Sean Roberts is a Licensed Independent Mental Health Practitioner (LIMHP) who has worked within the mental health field since 2011 and has been a member of the ESU5 Wellness 4 ALL team since 2022.</p> | <p>Session Breakout 1:</p> <p>A. From Burnout to Brilliance, Miranda Stoll LIMHP, LADC</p> <p>This 60-minute interactive workshop blends neuroscience, somatic practices, and practical self-care strategies to help Child Welfare Professionals, care giving staff, and members of the community combat burnout and strengthen resilience. Through hands-on exercises and brain-based education, participants will leave with tools they can immediately apply to feel more grounded, energized, and effective in their vital roles.</p> <p>B. Elevating Engagement: Moving from Transactional to Transformational, Cindy Reed, MPA & Thomas Threlkeld</p> <p>This workshop helps child welfare professionals shift from transactional to transformational practice. Participants will learn to elevate child and youth voice to build sustainable, permanent legal, cultural, and relational connections.</p> <p>Using QIC-EY tools, the session focuses on key messages and core competencies for authentic engagement.</p> <p>C. Where in the world are the kids? (How to get them to 1st period), Jamie Mapp, Ed.S., NCSP & Sean Roberts, LIMHP, LPC</p> <p>Join us to explore how chronic absenteeism is often a signal - not the problem itself.</p> <p>This session invites professionals to consider how attendance connects to mental health, trauma, and family dynamics, while offering practical ideas and perspectives to help build relationships, better understand barriers, and support youth in re-engaging with school.</p> |  <p>A. Miranda Stoll is a licensed mental health practitioner, trauma-informed leadership facilitator, and community systems consultant with extensive experience supporting all professionals.</p>  <p>B. Cindy Reed, is a seasoned youth advocate with over 15 years of experience in empowering young people, fostering meaningful partnerships, and guiding non-profit leaders.</p>  <p>C. Jamie Mapp is a nationally certified school psychologist with over 15 years of experience in providing mental and behavioral health services to youth and families within educational settings.</p> |

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| <p>D. Devaney Room</p>  <p>D. Jason Varga is currently the Executive Director for Cause Collective in Lincoln, a local membership agency that strengthens other nonprofits so they can better serve the community. Previously, Jason has spent twenty-five years working for other nonprofits.</p> | <p>D. Non-Profit Board 101, Part I, Jason Varga & Dawn Rockey</p> <p>This training provides an overview of the ten core responsibilities of a nonprofit board, as defined by BoardSource, a national leader in nonprofit board education and governance.</p> <p>Participants will gain a clearer understanding of the collective responsibilities of a nonprofit board and explore practical tips for:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strengthening Collaboration, • Alignment, • and Effectiveness among board members. <p>This experience is designed as a two-part journey, so to get the most out of our time together, please plan on joining us for both Part I and Part II. We've built these sessions to flow naturally into one another, and we can't wait to see the whole Non-Profit Board training unfold with you!</p> |  <p>D. Dawn Rockey joined CASA for Lancaster County as Executive Director in December 2006. Dawn came to CASA with a background in state government and commercial banking. She is a graduate of UNL, with a bachelor's degree in international Affairs and completed graduate hours in Public Administration and Political Science.</p> |
| <p>11:00am – 11:15am</p> | <p><i>Break</i></p> | <p>Perkins/Merlin Room</p> |
| <p>11:15am – 12:15pm</p> <p>A. Rodgers Room</p> | <p>Session Breakout 2:</p> <p>A. Hard Conversations Prevent Harder Problems, Miranda Stoll LIMHP, LADC</p> <p>Working with youth and family means navigating emotionally charged situations, complex systems, and competing expectations. When difficult conversations are avoided or softened too much, the impact doesn't disappear, it often shows up later as confusion, frustration, burnout, or strained relationships.</p> <p>This session will emphasize real-world application, psychological safety, and prevention-focused communication skills that protect both professionals and the families they serve.</p> |  <p>A. Miranda Stoll is a licensed mental health practitioner, trauma-informed leadership facilitator, and community systems consultant with extensive experience supporting all professionals.</p> |

B. Rozier Room

B. Working with GAL Attorneys as Advocates: Their Responsibilities and How to Collaborate Effectively, Michelle Paxton. J.D.

Guardian ad Litem (GAL) attorneys serve a unique dual role in Nebraska’s juvenile court acting as both legal counsel and best interests advocate for children. This session provides a practical overview of the GAL’s statutory responsibilities and courtroom duties, while focusing on strategies for effective collaboration with parents’ counsel, county attorneys, and child welfare professionals. Participants will gain tools to strengthen communication, reduce conflict, and promote child-centered, high-quality advocacy in juvenile cases.



B. Michelle Paxton is the Founder and Director of the NE Children’s Justice and Legal Advocacy Center (NCJC) and an Assistant Professor at the University of Nebraska College of Law.

C. Crouch Room

C. Real Colors Personality Workshop Part I, Jackie Cervantes-Guzman

Join us here to start this journey with us. Real Colors is such a wonderful way to see the world through a brand-new lens, helping you celebrate your own unique strengths while discovering the amazing traits in those around you.



C. Jackie Cervantes-Guzman earned a Bachelor of Science degree from UNL with a major in Elementary Education. After earning a master’s degree in education, she began her 20-year career with the UNL Extension first as a Positive Youth Development Educator then an Early Childhood.

D. Devaney Room



D. Jason Varga is the Executive Director for Cause Collective in Lincoln, a local membership agency that strengthens other nonprofits so they can better serve the community. Previously, Jason has spent twenty-five years working for other nonprofits.

Because this is a two-part experience, we ask that you join us for both Part I and Part II. This ensures we can build that solid foundation for a strong, connected team together in a way that’s fun, interactive, and truly meaningful. We can’t wait to dive in with you!


D. Non-Profit Board 101, Part II, Jason Varga & Dawn Rockey

Welcome back! We’re so excited to have you join us for the second half of our journey. This session is a true continuation of the wonderful conversations we started in Nonprofit Board 101, Part I, so we’ll be picking up right where we left off.



D. Dawn Rockey joined CASA for Lancaster County as Executive Director in December 2006. Dawn came to CASA with a background in state government and commercial banking. She has a bachelor’s degree from UNL in international Affairs.

Together, we’ll walk through the rest of the board’s essential responsibilities and make sure there’s plenty of time for all your thoughtful questions. It’s going to be a great way to wrap up everything we’ve learned!

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| <p>12:15pm - 12:30pm</p> | <p>Break</p> | <p>Perkins/Merlin Room</p> |
| <p>12:30pm - 1:45pm</p> <p>Ardis Ballroom</p>  <p>Corrie Kielty, NE CASA Executive Director</p> | <p>Lunch, Networking, Awards & Tristian Smith, Keynote</p> <p>Join us for a special luncheon as we celebrate "The Power of One" the incredible way one person, one action, and one community can truly transform the lives of children and families across Nebraska.</p> <p>As you step into the Ardis Ballroom, please feel free to make yourself at home. Help yourself to a delicious meal from the buffet, settle into your table, and enjoy the chance to connect and catch up with one another.</p> <p>Once everyone is settled, Corrie Kielty, NE CASA Executive Director, will take the stage to honor our wonderful award winners.</p> <p>The Voice That Stays: Advocacy, Belonging, and the Power of Showing Up by Tristian Smith, in this powerful keynote, author, former foster youth, and CASA volunteer, Tristian Smith will explore how one consistent voice can shape the course of a child's life. Drawing from his memoir <i>Against All Odds</i> and his work advocating for children and youth, Tristian reflects on the lasting impact of the adults who showed up, spoke up, and stayed present when it mattered most. Centered on advocacy, belonging, and the life-changing power of consistency, this keynote will challenge attendees to see that their voice is not just heard in courtrooms and case files, but felt in the daily lives of children who need someone to remain steady during uncertainty.</p> |  <p>Tristian Smith is an award-winning author, keynote speaker, and child welfare advocate whose journey from foster care to military leadership shapes his work with audiences across the country. Tristian holds a B.A. in History from Fort Valley State University, an M.S. in Emergency Management from the University of Maryland Global Campus, and an M.S. in Intelligence Analysis from Johns Hopkins University. He is the author of <i>Against All Odds</i>, an Amazon Best Seller and award-winning memoir that explores resilience, mentorship, and the life-changing impact of steady support systems.</p> |
| <p>1:45pm - 2:00pm</p> | <p>Break</p> | <p>Perkins/Merlin Room</p> |
| <p>2:00pm - 3:00pm</p> <p>A. Rodgers Room</p> | <p>Session Breakout 3:</p> <p>A. Building Bridges: Practical Strategies for Supporting Youth Aging Out of Foster Care, Tristian Smith</p> <p>Learn practical strategies aimed at empowering youth who are transitioning out of the foster care system. Drawing from personal experiences detailed in <i>Against All Odds</i>, participants will learn actionable methods to foster independence, resilience, and stability among young adults.</p> |  <p>A. Tristian Smith, Lunch Keynote Speaker.</p> |

3:15pm - 4:15pm

Ardis Ballroom



Cindy Reed, Moderator, is a seasoned youth advocate with over 15 years of experience in empowering young people, fostering meaningful partnerships, and guiding non-profit leaders.

Panel: ***Making It Matter: How The Power of One Can Champion Youth Voice in the Courtroom***

This closing panel brings together judges, and individuals with lived experience in the child welfare and court system for an honest, cross-perspective conversation about what it truly means to elevate youth voice in proceedings. The dialogue in questions cultivated from the field, the trending needs of youth, and what panelists themselves believe the child welfare community most needs to hear.

Bring your questions that you have always wanted to ask people who have experienced the child welfare system first-hand AND the Judges who make decisions affecting these lives.

Participants will leave with concrete strategies they can apply immediately in their own role, a sharper lens for examining where current practices may limit youth participation, and an invitation to ask harder questions about the policies and culture within their courts and agencies truly support youth voices.



Hon. Linda A. Bauer has served on the Jefferson County Court bench since 2014. A member of the Nebraska Bar. She was also the Jefferson County Attorney from 1996 – 2014 and in private practice from 1996-2014. In 2025, received the Distinguished Judge for Service to the Community.



Hon. Roger J. Heideman has served on the Lancaster County Court bench since 2006 and previously in private practice for several years. Since 2010, he has been the Presiding Judge for Family Treatment Drug Court. A member of the Nebraska Bar. In 2016 he received the Nebraska Supreme Court Distinguished Judge Award for Improvement to the Judiciary.