October 13, 2026

3rd Annual

Garden State Conference on Food Security

Office of the Food Security Advocate

Food Security in the First 1,000 Days: Building Partnerships for Community & Care

Atiya Weiss — Moderator

Executive Director
Burke Foundation

Atiya Weiss is the Executive Director of the Burke Foundation, where she leads efforts to advance transformative programs and policies that promote the health, well-being, and resilience of children and families across NJ.

Her leadership spans investments in healthy pregnancies, parent-child relationships, and early learning and care—areas that form the foundation for lifelong opportunity.

Atiya is deeply committed to breaking down silos and building coalitions—centered on community voices—to drive systems change and create intergenerational cycles of opportunity. She collaborates with leaders across philanthropy, government, and nonprofit sectors to tackle the complex social challenges facing underserved children and families, believing that effective, cross-sector partnerships can unlock community potential and deliver lasting impact.

Under her leadership, the Burke Foundation has become known for its disciplined and innovative approach to philanthropy.

Atiya and her team have proudly co-invested in evidence-based models that deliver relationship-centered care, such as Family Connects, a universal nurse home visiting program now scaling statewide,

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and Centering Pregnancy, a group prenatal care model proven to improve maternal and infant health outcomes.

In recent years, the Foundation has also helped launch major policy and funding initiatives to support the child care workforce, expand HealthySteps in pediatric care, and promote maternal mental health. Previously, Atiya served as Executive Director at JPMorgan's Philanthropy Center, where she advised charitable trusts and family foundations on strategic giving and social impact. During her tenure, she played a key role in launching the $100 million Global Health Investment Fund in collaboration with the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. Earlier in her career, she led the Pfizer Foundation's global health portfolio, overseeing initiatives such as the Global Health Fellows program and Mobilize Against Malaria.

Atiya is a 2021 Aspen Institute Ascend Fellow and holds degrees in biology and public policy from Brown University, as well as an MPH in epidemiology from Columbia University. She lives in Princeton, New Jersey, with her husband and two sons.

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Payal Arora

Panelist

Deputy Director, WIC
New Jersey Department of Health

Payal Arora, MS, RDN, CLC is the Deputy Director of the New Jersey Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) at the New Jersey Department of Health.

A public health nutrition leader with more than 15 years of experience, she has dedicated her career to advancing maternal and child health, nutrition security, and equitable access to healthy food through innovative programs and cross-sector partnerships. In her current role, Payal provides statewide leadership for New Jersey WIC, helping oversee program operations, federal compliance, and the advancement of nutrition and support services for women, infants, and children. A central focus of her work is strengthening WIC's connections with other state programs, healthcare systems, and community-based resources so that families can access a broader network of services supporting health and well-being during pregnancy, infancy, and early childhood.

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Panelist

Deputy Director, WIC
New Jersey Department of Health

Prior to her current role, Payal served as the New Jersey SNAP-Ed Program Manager, providing strategic leadership for the statewide federally funded program.

During her tenure, she helped initiate and advance cross-program collaborations, including the Healthy Corner Store Initiative, bringing together SNAP-Ed, WIC, and community partners to strengthen healthy food access and connect families with community resources. In 2025, Payal and the New Jersey SNAP-Ed community were recognized by the New Jersey Office of the Food Security Advocate (OFSA) with the Community Excellence Award for their contributions to advancing food security and collaborative community efforts across the state.

Payal's public health perspective is also informed by international experience in India, where she worked in chronic disease prevention and maternal and child health. Combined with her experience across clinical, community, local, and state public health systems, this has shaped her commitment to addressing the social and structural factors that influence nutrition and health outcomes.

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Throughout her career, Payal has focused on transforming individual programs into stronger, more connected systems of care through strategic planning, program development, interagency collaboration, and community engagement.

She is passionate about building partnerships that strengthen food and nutrition security and provide families with coordinated support.

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Lisa Asare

Panelist

President and Chief Executive Officer
New Jersey Maternal and Infant Health Innovation Authority

Lisa Asare is the President and Chief Executive Officer of the New Jersey Maternal and Infant Health Innovation Authority (NJMIHIA), the first state-established authority in the United States solely dedicated to improving maternal and infant health outcomes.

She brings more than 25 years of senior leadership experience in New Jersey state government, including executive roles within the Departments of Health and Human Services, where she oversaw Medicaid, behavioral health, and family health programs. She currently serves as a member of Governor Mikie Sherrill's Cabinet and is a recipient of the 2023 Maternal and Child Health Bureau Director's Award from HRSA, recognizing her outstanding public service.

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Iris Jones

Panelist

Assistant Commissioner
New Jersey Department of Health

Iris Jones has dedicated her career to the advancement of health equity and improving health outcomes for those with trauma, substance use and psychiatric or mental health disorders.

Prior to working at the New Jersey Department of Health, she worked at Cooper University Healthcare where she achieved her goal of integrating inclusive, behavioral health treatment into traditional health care service delivery. Iris co-founded the Cooper Center for Healing EMPOWER perinatal clinic, a nationally recognized program for the treatment of pregnant and parenting people with substance use disorders.

Iris is an expert in the field of perinatal addiction and mental health, with a deep understanding of how race, poverty, and gender inequality unfold and influence health outcomes. As a social justice advocate, she made critical policy recommendations to state government partners, informed by her direct proximity to the needs and complexity of the families she served.

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Assistant Commissioner
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Currently, Iris is focused on decreasing health disparities, improving access to evidence-based health care, incorporating mental health and substance use treatment into traditional medical care, addressing social determinants of health and improving health outcomes for all of New Jersey's families.

When she is not at work, Iris is keeping busy with her two young sons and her husband of more than 20 years. Her credentials include Licensed Professional Counselor (LPC), a Licensed Clinical Alcohol and Drug Counselor (LCADC), Certified Clinical Supervisor (CCS), National Board-Certified Counselor (NCC) and Perinatal Mental Health Certified (PMH-C).

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Dr. Cassandra Simmel — Panelist

Associate Professor, School of Social Work
Rutgers University

Cassandra Simmel is an Associate Professor and Director of the PhD Program at the School of Social Work at Rutgers University.

She served as the Founding Director of the MSW Certificate on Promoting Child and Adolescent Well-being (ChAP) and as Interim Co-Director of the Center on Violence Against Women and Children in 2014.

Dr. Simmel's scholarship focuses on adolescents involved in child-serving systems, particularly the child welfare and behavioral health systems. Her research examines the complex behavioral health challenges adolescents experience and how these challenges intersect with involvement in the child welfare system. She is also interested in how young people navigate child welfare involvement, especially during the vulnerable transition from state oversight to adulthood and independent living. Youth leaving foster care are especially vulnerable to food insecurity and related hardships as they navigate the transition to independent adulthood.

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Her research has been funded by the Patient-Centered Outcomes Research Institute (PCORI), the New Jersey Department of Children and Families, Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA) of New Jersey, Prevent Child Abuse New Jersey, the Smith Richardson Foundation, and the Silberman Foundation.

Her work has been published in numerous journals, including Child Maltreatment, Child Abuse & Neglect, Children and Youth Services Review, Child Development, Journal of Public Child Welfare, and Journal of Policy Practice. Dr. Simmel's teaching focuses on child and youth policy, adolescent development, and adolescent mental health. She has received two awards recognizing excellence in teaching (2010 and 2021).