

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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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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Iris Jones

Panelist

**Assistant Commissioner
New Jersey Department of Health**

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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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).