

Brad Hansen

For 10 years, Brad Hansen has been the Public Policy Director at Families Together in New York State, organizing impacted families and young people with lived experience navigating systems of care and oppression to advance policy reform and systems change.

Melanie Hecker

Melanie Hecker is the current Statewide Youth Advocacy Specialist for the New York State Office of Mental Health, as well as a young person with lived experience in the mental health, developmental disability, special education, and independent living systems. An autistic person with co-occurring mental health challenges, Melanie is a lifelong systems advocate. She began her career as the Systems Advocate of Youth Power before going on to get a combined BA/MPA degree in Public Policy and Administration from the University at Albany. Prior to working for the Office of Mental Health, she also served as a Research and Training Associate for the National Center for START Services and served on the Post-Secondary Advisory Council for Students with Disabilities to the Board of Regents. Melanie received the Beacon Leadership Award from Independent Living Center of the Hudson Valley in 2019 and the START Champion Award in 2022.

Mark Holley

Hello! I'm Mark, a passionate aspiring instructional designer currently pursuing a Master's degree in Educational Technology and Learning Design at SUNY Empire State College. My journey into this field was sparked by my experiences with online learning during the pandemic, which opened my eyes to the transformative power of digital education. The flexibility and accessibility of online learning have become my driving force, leading me to explore how educational technology can break barriers and bring learning to everyone, anywhere, at any time. My commitment to accessible design is deeply rooted in my current role as the NY Connects Coordinator for Access to Independence in Cortland, NY. Here, I assist individuals with disabilities in accessing essential local resources, a role that continuously shapes my understanding of the necessity for inclusive and accessible educational solutions. This mission aligns seamlessly with my decade-long experience in graphic design and my role as a graphic design department supervisor for five years. These experiences have honed my skills in visual communication and design, setting a strong foundation for my transition into instructional design. [Link to portfolio](#)

Zachary Kilmer

Zack Kilmer is an autistic LGBTQ+ young adult who has had a passion for activism and civics since he was a child. He works in the FTNYS policy department in order to coordinate and inject youth voice into our systemic/policy change efforts. Before joining Youth Power, Zack graduated from SUNY Brockport with a bachelor's degree in English & Political Science and ran for public office in his hometown of East Greenbush. He is also an aspiring writer and a proud dad to two fur-babies.

Michelle Lyles

Michelle Lyles is a vulnerable truth-teller and listener, who uses her experience to highlight the flaws in the system and cultivate community around shared experiences to start conversations around possible solutions. Michelle is currently working as a youth advocate for You Gotta Believe, where she advocates for youth who are at risk of aging out without loving unconditional support for their right to a family. Michelle has created and facilitated workshops around permanency and older teen adoption for youth and potential parents. She also runs an Instagram Live Show for YGB where she connects with youth who are or have been in the system. Michelle has a passion for this work because she was in foster care herself. Though Michelle was eventually reunited with her bio family, she has also witnessed the lack of support from the system's resources and how it has affected her family to this day. Michelle strives to break generational curses by being her authentic self and encouraging the youth around her to do the same.

Shantalee Martinez

Shantalee Martinez is the Project Coordinator for Family Mental Health Programming at the Mental Health Association in New York State (MHANYS), which is the home to the Mental Health Community Partners and CarePath Programs. In the New York State legislature, Shantalee helped increase statewide support for legislation that improved the quality of life and safety for undocumented and incarcerated people. As a bilingual immigration paralegal specialist, Shantalee built trust with undocumented asylum seekers to continue trauma-informed advocacy. In addition to serving LGBTQ+ survivors of domestic violence, sexual assault, and other crimes throughout the Capital Region, they hosted culturally

relevant events to showcase various healing methods. After realizing that connecting survivors to family, friends, and neighborhood resources resurrects our sparks of hope, Shantalee uses their role for MHANYS Family Mental Health Programming to highlight that wellness is most achievable when in partnership with others. As a non-binary individual, Shantalee hopes to deconstruct traditional views regarding families, expanding the definition of healing beyond their very own community.

Nia Imani Potter

Hello, my name is Nia Imani Potter, and I am proud to be an advocate with You Gotta Believe in the "Nobody Ages Out" division. With over 20 years of experience in Foster Care and Homelessness services in NYC, I bring a unique perspective shaped by my personal experience.

Meghann Simpson

Meghann Simpson is an ambitious leader motivated to reform and develop support services for youth and adults. Her experience with trauma and mental illness, and her dedication to persevere ignited a passion to support others along their healing journey. Meghann has dedicated herself to healing from neglect, sexual violence, interpersonal violence (IPV), and mental illness. Her experiences have given her insight into the need for trauma-informed mental health services. Meghann has experience working with various populations including but not limited to youth and adults experiencing serious mental illness, re-entry felons, LGBTQIA+ individuals, and children coping with severe behavioral and emotional health challenges. Recently, Meghann co-founded Now She Speaks, a domestic and interpersonal violence non-profit organization, to provide a peer-support perspective to those experiencing IPV. Meghann hopes to inspire youth to know as fact that they can live a happy and successful life regardless of trauma and mental illness.

Michelle Varvaro

Michelle Varvaro has worked with youth and families for over 30 years. She holds an MA in both Rehabilitation and Special Education. Michelle presently runs the CHHUNY Community Youth Collaborative, a networking and resource-sharing group for staff working with youth.

Simcha Weinstein

Simcha Weinstein is a best-selling author, syndicated columnist, and Family Peer Advocate. He currently serves as the Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) and Engagement Coordinator at Families Together in New York State. Additionally, he chairs the Religious Affairs Committee at Pratt Institute. Recognized as "New York's Hippest Rabbi" by PBS, he resides in Brooklyn, New York, where he also serves as the Brooklyn lead for the New York Alliance for Developmental Disabilities (NYADD) and on NYC Mayor Adams' clergy mental health task force.