



October 2025 Consortium Fellow Spotlights

Rachael Jagger is a maternal-child health professional dedicated to improving outcomes for families through education, access, and community-based support. Rachel earned her undergraduate degree in Early Childhood Special Education and her passion has always been teaching—whether it’s young children or new parents. She is certified DONA Birth and Postpartum Doula, Certified Childbirth Educator (CAPP), New Parent Educator, and Certified Lactation Counselor (CLC). The comprehensive, evidence-based curricula for free childbirth, lactation, and newborn care classes she developed and implemented in Ontario County have been very successful and were adopted by surrounding counties as a result. Her work bridges clinical education and public health outreach, helping to reduce barriers to prenatal education and postpartum support. She believes that by equipping parents with knowledge and confidence—regardless of income, background, or birth plan—we can build healthier families and stronger communities.

Mary Ross holds a BS in biology and a psychology minor from Syracuse University and an MPH in epidemiology with a certificate in human genetics from the University of Pittsburgh. Before becoming a NYSPHC fellow, she was involved with research ranging from genetics and epigenetics to health education and equity. As a fellow, she utilizes her program planning, program and organizational management, partnership development, and public health communication skills in her daily work.

Rayon Soares is a strategic project manager with over 10 years of experience across public health, government, and military organizations. Currently a Public Health Fellow II and Quality Specialist with Jefferson County Public Health Service, he specializes in data analytics, quality improvement, and performance reporting through KPIs. A former U.S. Army Mortuary Affairs NCOIC and Program Coordinator, Soares holds a Master of Arts in Medical Sciences – Molecular Medicine and is dedicated to advancing public health outcomes through data-driven solutions.



October 2025 Consortium Public Health Experts

Bryon Backenson holds a master's degree in Epidemiology from the University at Albany and has served New York State as an epidemiologist for over two decades. He has been Director of NYS Department of Health's Bureau of Communicable Disease control since 2020 and is a longtime assistant professor at UAlbany. His areas of expertise include communicable disease, epidemiology and data, COVID-19, communications, and emergency preparedness.

Luke Grandis has nine of years of public health experience working for both community-based and governmental not-for-profit organizations. After spending six years working directly with the community through syringe service programs and advocacy organizations, Luke completed his own NYSPHC fellowship with the NYS Office of Drug User Health where he gained skills in contract management, overdose data to action projects, and developing educational materials for funded programs. Luke now serves as a Health Program Coordinator I at the Bureau of Hepatitis Health Care and Epidemiology within the NYS Department of Health's AIDS Institute where he manages several contracts across three initiatives: hepatitis C care and treatment, hepatitis C innovative models of care for people who inject drugs, and hepatitis c community mobilization. Luke has a Bachelor of Science degree from SUNY New Paltz and is dedicated to improving the health outcomes of people who use and inject drugs in New York State.

Samantha Hidalgo is a passionate public health professional dedicated to advancing equity through community-driven solutions, systems change, and cross-sector collaboration. She currently serves as the Public Health Program Manager at the Buffalo Center for Health Equity, where she manages active grant funding across ten projects and has helped secure new funding to support health equity initiatives. With a Master of Public Health from the University at Buffalo, Samantha brings a strong academic foundation and hands-on experience in research, education, and nonprofit leadership. She has held fellowships with the Institute for Nonprofit Practice and the University of South Florida's PHEARLESS program, where she designed and led a capacity-building initiative, the *Health Equity Ambassador Program*. Samantha also serves as a mentor to emerging public health professionals through UB's Envisions Mentoring Program. Her work is grounded in cultural humility, health equity, and a deep commitment to marginalized communities. She is a proud alumna of the Delta Omega Gamma Lambda Chapter of the National Public Health Honorary Society.