

Poverty & Opportunity Training Forum:

Compassion in Action

Workshop Descriptions

CONCURRENT SESSION I

10:30 – 11:45 AM

Dialogue with Keynote

Concurrent Session I: 10:30 – 11:45

Ferene Paris, Founder & Artist, All Hearts Inspirations

Join Ferene Paris for a heart-centered dialogue following her morning keynote. In this workshop, Paris will invite participants to reflect on what emerged from the keynote and engage through thoughtful prompts.

Health Law in Vermont: 2026 Changes, Challenges, and Opportunities

Concurrent Session I: 10:30 – 11:45

Alicia Roderigue, Office of the Health Care Advocate, Vermont Legal Aid

Join the Office of the Health Care Advocate for an overview of Vermont's health insurance landscape. Learn about what's new in 2026 and how the Office of the Health Care Advocate can support Vermonters who are facing health insurance and access to care challenges.

Trauma-Informed Leadership for Uncertain Times

Concurrent Session I: 10:30 – 11:45

Auburn Watersong (she/her), CEO, Watersong Consulting

In this workshop leaders will explore what it means to be a trauma-informed organization and how to lead in a way that fosters a trauma-informed culture, especially amidst the stress of uncertainty. Topics include: the neurobiology of uncertainty, leadership styles, and building practices that foster resilience.

Demystifying AI: Practical Applicability in Social Services

Concurrent Session I: 10:30 – 11:45

Miles Latham, Director of Artificial Intelligence, Agency of Digital Services, State of VT

We'll start with an accessible introduction to AI - clarifying what AI and large language models (LLMs) are (and aren't). Then, we'll dive into some practical organizational use cases, from document processing to frontline applications like case note generation and translation. We'll focus on identifying risks and opportunities in social services. You'll leave with a strong foundation in AI concepts and tools to evaluate and mitigate common risks in your own work setting.

From Presence to Partnership: Deepening Community Engagement

Concurrent Session I: 10:30 – 11:45

Indra Acharya, Independent Consultant & Sophi Veltrop, Communications & Engagement Coordinator, Vermont Climate Action Office

True community engagement is built on trust, shared power, and an understanding of lived experience. This workshop explores the skills, commitments, and strategies needed to build meaningful relationships and create lasting impact.

Economic Mobility as a Vital Condition of Health: Why Partnerships with Health Care are Essential

Concurrent Session I: 10:30 – 11:45

Ron Dendas, Independent Consultant

The interdependent relationship between health of a community and its opportunities for economic mobility is well documented in research. During this session, we'll develop a deeper understanding of the connections between health and economic mobility and discuss how transformational relationships between social service agencies and health care systems can be developed and advanced.

CONCURRENT SESSION II

1 :15 – 2 :30 PM

Reflective Practice: Building a Culture of Curiosity in High-Stress Human Systems (Part 1)

Concurrent Session II: 1:15 – 2 :30

NOTE: This is a prerequisite to Part 2 offered in Concurrent Session 3. Participants may elect to only attend Part 1.

David Melnick, LICSW, Director of the Transforming Trauma Initiative, NFI Vermont

Professionals working in poverty-impacted systems are asked to think clearly, act ethically, and remain relational while operating under chronic stress, scarcity, and emotional load. Yet most organizations are structured in ways that suppress reflection, sanitize emotion, and reward speed over sense-making. This workshop introduces Reflective Practice 3.0 as a critical workforce systems strategy—to protect staff, improve decision-making, and strengthen equity. Participants will explore how unmanaged stress predictably degrades judgment, narrows perception, and increases reactivity. The session will examine how reflective cultures redistribute emotional labor, normalize mistakes as data rather than defects, and create places for the inevitable pain of this work to be metabolized rather than transmitted. Through guided reflection, practical questioning strategies, and concrete implementation pathways, participants will leave with tools to embed reflective practice into supervision, meetings, and daily interactions—supporting staff well-being while increasing the system’s capacity to respond humanely and effectively to complexity.

Change Management

Concurrent Session II: 1:15 – 2 :30

Dave Dore (he/him) and Sage Ruth (she/her), Co-Founders, Structural Integrity

Change is inevitable — how we navigate it makes all the difference. In this workshop, we’ll start with a quick refresher on key Change Management principles, then open the floor for group conversation and learning. Participants will share their experiences with change in their organization or community: What happened, how did it unfold, and what might have made it smoother?

Sustainable Resilience: Supporting Your Long-Term Well-Being

Concurrent Session II: 1:15 – 2 :30

Auburn Watersong (she/her), CEO, Watersong Consulting

In this workshop, participants will explore the neuroscience of resilience and examine how internal conditioning and boundary setting affect the path to resilience. Participants will leave with an understanding of sustainable well-being and two practices to assist in growing it: 1) a method for challenging negative conditioning, and 2) a process for setting and communicating effective boundaries.

Whole Family Approach

Concurrent Session II: 1:15 – 2 :30

Jenna O'Farrell, Executive Director and Nancy Powers, Director of Early Childhood Education & Family Services, Northeast Kingdom Community Action (NEKCA)

Learn more from the NEKCA team about how they have blended and braided services and resources to create a comprehensive "Whole Family Approach" grounded in family-centered coaching and embracing a holistic mindset that has restructured their organization to serve families across the Northeast Kingdom. In this workshop, you'll learn more about NEKCA's multi-generational and strength-based approach, working with children and adults, to support families in personal goal setting. You'll learn more about why NEKCA is integrating services, key elements of family-centered coaching and how to anchor organizational change to support long-term family outcomes and how to apply lessons from NEKCA's journey to your own organization or program - with practical steps to take towards service-integration.

Ethical Storytelling for Impact and Advocacy

Concurrent Session II: 1:15 – 2 :30

Indra Acharya, Independent Consultant

Human stories can mobilize change when they are told with care. This session guides participants in articulating their “why,” identifying target audiences, and practicing ethical and empowering approaches to sharing lived experiences.

ROMA Clinic

Concurrent Session II: 1:15 – 2 :30

Stephanie Davison, Director of Quality Improvement, Champlain Office of Economic Opportunity

ROMA = Results Oriented Management & Accountability. But what does that really mean? Does ROMA mystify you? If you are a staff member at a Community Action Agency, then you've likely heard of ROMA, but maybe you could use some help thinking about how to apply ROMA in your work. In this workshop, we'll spend a little time on the basics and more time together answering questions and looking at how ROMA applies to your work. Bring your questions!

CONCURRENT SESSION III

2 :45 – 4 :00 PM

Reflective Practice: Building a Culture of Curiosity in High-Stress Human Systems (Part 2)

Concurrent Session III: 2:45 – 4:00

NOTE: Participants must attend Part 1, offered during Session II, as a pre-requisite.

David Melnick, LICSW, Director of the Transforming Trauma Initiative, NFI Vermont

Professionals working in poverty-impacted systems are asked to think clearly, act ethically, and remain relational while operating under chronic stress, scarcity, and emotional load. Yet most organizations are structured in ways that suppress reflection, sanitize emotion, and reward speed over sense-making. This workshop introduces Reflective Practice 3.0 as a critical workforce systems strategy—to protect staff, improve decision-making, and strengthen equity. Participants will explore how unmanaged stress predictably degrades judgment, narrows perception, and increases reactivity. The session will examine how reflective cultures redistribute emotional labor, normalize mistakes as data rather than defects, and create places for the inevitable pain of this work to be metabolized rather than transmitted. Through guided reflection, practical questioning strategies, and concrete implementation pathways, participants will leave with tools to embed reflective practice into supervision, meetings, and daily interactions—supporting staff well-being while increasing the system's capacity to respond humanely and effectively to complexity.

Sustainable Growth

Concurrent Session III: 2:45 – 4:00

Dave Dore (he/him) & Sage Ruth (she/her), Co-Founders, Structural Integrity

Growth is often a sign of success – but it can quietly strain the systems and people holding an organization together. This workshop explores why practices that worked when an organization was small often break down as it grows, and how to build people-centered operations that support impact without burnout. This session will be especially useful for organizations that are growing, planning to grow, or feeling stretched by success.

Housing Social Work: It's Really About Getting to Know People

Concurrent Session III: 2:45 – 4:00

Mike Ohler and Darien Barton, Resident Services, Champlain Housing Trust

When it comes to housing (and some other types of) social work, we really don't want to be in our clients' lives forever. Part of addressing the need that brought them to us in the first place is to know who our clients really are and who else is or could be part of their personal team. Join us for an interactive session where we can explore what a personal team can look like and how to help folks who have lost hope believe they deserve positive people in their lives.

Maintaining and Supporting Mental Health in Times of Uncertainty

Concurrent Session III: 2:45 – 4:00

Terry Lavelly, Training & Community Engagement Director, Northeast Kingdom Human Services

Learn practical skills on how to stay mentally well while navigating times of uncertainty. This workshop will teach grounding skills to use and share with others to prioritize recovery, acknowledge struggles and support self-care and care of others. There is an emphasis on how we show up as care takers and service providers to empower one's recovery through motivational interviewing skills, empathy and curiosity.

Staying Mission True in Shifting Policy Landscapes

Concurrent Session III: 2:45 – 4:00

Indra Acharya, Independent Consultant

When policies feel unclear or conflicting, it can be easy for teams to lose their bearings. This workshop offers practical frameworks and scenario planning tools to help participants navigate change while staying grounded in mission and values.

Healthy Homes, Happy People

Concurrent Session III: 2:45 – 4:00

Will Eberle, Director of Weatherization, Capstone Community Action and Geoff Wilcox, Energy Services Director, Office of Economic Opportunity, State of Vermont

This presentation will highlight how Weatherization and Climate Impact programs can be a catalyst for improving mental health and well-being while increasing energy efficiency and affordability. This presentation will center the perspectives and lived experiences of clients and also provide more information about how energy efficiency and climate impact programs work. When we improve the built environment, we improve mental health and wellness while creating a more sustainable and vibrant economy.

Creating a Data-Driven Framework for Holistic Service Delivery

Concurrent Session III: 2:45 – 4:00

Elizabeth Emmett and Robin Kristoff, Northeast Kingdom Community Action

Holistic services begin with a holistic understanding of participants' needs. This session will explore what to consider when developing a comprehensive matrix to identify the varied needs of participants, how to incorporate a matrix into your agency's workflow, and how to utilize the matrix for data-driven decision-making. Participants will gain a better understanding of comprehensive service delivery models and how tools such as a matrix can help in providing structure for service navigation and data collection. This workshop is ideal for aspiring and current program leaders and managers.