

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION FOR INSTRUCTORS: Spring 2026

SARA MERRICK-ALBANO E-RYT 500, C-IAYT, is dedicated to guiding those facing chronic pain and psychosomatic pain disorders. As a co-founder of Yoga Therapy Associates, her vision is clear: to make the healing essence of yoga accessible and resonant. With a tailored approach that draws from traditional yoga practices infused with contemporary neuroscience insights, Sara offers specialized online yoga therapy. She also sees clients in person in Watertown and Trumbull. Her commitment is to everyone's journey, ensuring that every session is a step towards holistic wellness.

JENNIFER ALLEN, MA has been practicing Motivational Interviewing (MI) for approximately 3 years and has attended over a dozen trainings and received multiple certifications, including MITI coding, coaching, and feedback. Jennifer has also been trained to support individuals on how to learn MI techniques by certified and well-known MINT trainers. Outside of trainings, Jennifer has advanced her learning through several research-supported readings and activities to ensure she maintains the skills and knowledge to continue using the approach. Jennifer holds an undergraduate degree in psychology from the University of Rhode Island and a graduate degree in clinical psychology from the University of Massachusetts - Dartmouth. She has worked in the behavioral health and social services fields for several years. She has worked with adults experiencing emotional distress, anxiety, depression, interpersonal relationship conflicts, mood disorders, substance use, and psychotic disorders. Jennifer utilizes MI daily and has firsthand experience in the techniques' effectiveness in supporting positive outcomes. She is motivated to help other individuals in the behavioral health field learn MI to promote client wellness and treatment outcomes.

JENNIFER BERTON, PhD LCSW, is the founder of The Rose Center for Learning, which creates trainings for clinicians to build clinical skills rooted in community support. Dr. Berton has published articles in journals, magazines, and blogs and is the author of *Ethics for Addiction Professionals* (2014). For more than 20 years, Dr. Berton has been working with various populations in a variety of mental health settings and has been providing clinical training on many topics. She received her Masters and Doctorate from UC Berkeley and is licensed in the states of Connecticut and Rhode Island. Visit <http://myrosecenter.com>.

DEBRA BORZELLINO, LMFT, AAMFT Approved Supervisor and AAMFT Clinical Fellow has a career that has extended over 25 years. Deb is a trainer and presenter of Couples Therapy, Family of Origin, Family Systems Therapy, Birth Order and Vicarious Trauma. As the owner of Pieces That Fit, LLC., Deb provides couple, family, and individual therapy. Deb provides mentorship for AAMFT approved supervisor candidates and clinical consultation/supervision to associate and licensed professionals of all disciplines. Deb focuses on the professional development of the clinician, and traditional oversight of case review, interventions, case notes, treatment planning, ethical issues, and liability. Deb was an Adjunct Professor at SCSU MFT Department and Albertus Magnus Business Department.

RACHEL BOUCHER, LCSW, is currently the Clinical Director at Connecticut Coalition Against Domestic Violence. Prior to working in the Domestic Violence field, she worked as a clinician, supervisor and program director for 10 years providing mental health and substance use treatment to a variety of age groups in both outpatient and residential settings. Rachel has worked with survivors of violence as well as people who use violence in behavioral health settings. Rachel is passionate about providing training on domestic violence to behavioral health professionals as there is minimal training available on this topic despite its relevance and frequency. In all areas of her work her goal is to support people in obtaining resources, tools, and information to be more competent and feel more confident in their role.

BILLY BROMAGE, MSW, has been working at the Yale Program for Recovery and Community Health since 2012. He focuses on working alongside people in mental health and substance use recovery and people experiencing homelessness to engage with and shape their community. This work includes civic engagement and community-building projects like Project Connect and Focus Act Connect Everyday (FACE), as well as support for groups doing

advocacy and community organizing from a lived experience perspective including Witnesses to Hunger and the Unhoused Activists Community Team (U-ACT). In addition, he designs classes for psychiatry residents in partnership with New Haven community leaders and activists as a faculty member of the Social Justice and Health Equity curriculum in the Yale Department of Psychiatry. Billy was a core faculty member in the two-year Recovering Citizenship Learning Collaborative (RCLC), which was spearheaded by the Connecticut Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services (DMHAS).

ANTHONY CRETELLA, R.N., is a Registered Nurse who has worked as a Medical / Surgical Nurse since 2010 in the state's largest hospital systems. Before coming to the Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services he worked in Connecticut's Department of Corrections as a Nurse and Facility Staff Educator. While with the CT Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services he has functioned as a Nurse Consultant and Clinical Educator.

MICHAELA FISSEL, MA, is a Breathwork Practitioner, Meditation Facilitator, 200-Hour Wild Essence Yoga Teacher, and works in the role of Executive Director at Advocacy Unlimited, Inc. Michaela has studied recovery for nearly 16 years and recently completed a graduate degree in Conscious Studies where she explored breathwork as a method for supporting recovery from trauma. Through an integrative approach, Michaela invites a new way of perceiving and responding to distress from a place of empowered present awareness.

TARA HALL, Author, Coach and Certified Transformational Trainer in the Success Principles who creates and facilitates highly engaged and experiential trainings, workshop; hosts and moderates speaking engagements for educational settings, businesses and professional development conferences. Conducts customized trainings with an emphasis on leadership development, organizational culture, staff engagement, communication and coaching for personal and professional development.

BOB JOPE, LMHC, has been a member of the Motivational Interviewing Network of Trainers since 2010. He teaches Motivational Interviewing (MI) as an adjunct faculty member at Salve Regina University, Rhode Island College, and University of Massachusetts; he is also a consultant with the Addiction Technology Transfer Center at Brown University and works as an MI coder for a nationally recognized coding lab. Bob is the lead trainer for Jope Consulting Services, has taught MI at agencies all over New England, and consults internationally on teaching and coding methods. Holding a Master's degree in Clinical Psychology, Bob has worked in the mental health, child welfare, and substance abuse fields for the past twenty-five years. He was originally trained in MI by Stephen Andrew in 2007, and has since trained with Ali Hall, Alan Lyme, Bill Miller, and Terri Moyers. Bob has also developed and taught program-specific MI training applications and has trained thousands of people in various levels of Motivational Interviewing.

DANA KUKUCKA started with DMHAS as a trainer for Whiting Forensic Hospital in the spring of 2024. She has over 15 years' experience in developing curriculum, educating staff of all disciplines, and providing trainings in both the classroom and congregate care settings. She began her career as a tenured Middle School Teacher serving 10 years in the Connecticut Public School system creating and implementing daily curriculum, mentoring new teachers and developing teaching plans based on student need. Dana also has experience delivering and implementing evidence-based models in programs designed for juveniles involved in the criminal justice system placed through CSSD and individuals with developmental disabilities through DDS. She has vast experience collaborating with quality assurance professionals to ensure material is presented with fidelity and has facilitated a variety of CBT based groups throughout her professional experiences. Dana is an experienced train the trainer presenter, providing training and support to frontline staff, supervisors, program managers and directors while in her previous role at DDS and was actively engaged in the creation and delivery of new hire trainings.

LINDA LENTINI has over 20 years of peer service experience and 15 of those years have focused on emphasizing the mind-body connection around mental health and addiction recovery. After exploring many options to support her personal healing journey over the past 25 years, she discovered Breath-Body-Mind (BBM). In this training, Linda will share the Coherent Breathing, part of BBM, that is evidence-based to balance the parasympathetic and sympathetic branches of the nervous system. Linda is a Rehab Therapist at Ct Valley, Hospital, a Level Four BBM teacher, Executive Director of the Breath-Body-Mind-Foundation, Yoga and Qigong instructor, Aromatherapist, and trained in Stephanie Covington Healing/Beyond Trauma.

GIA MONTELEONE is the program specialist for the substance exposed pregnancy initiative of Connecticut. She is a recent graduate with a degree in psychology. With a strong commitment and passion to education and growth she serves as a very valuable resource to the program. Her fresh perspective and enthusiasm for the initiative gives very good insight into the CAPTA and CARA legislations.

TERESA NIEVES (she/her) is a queer, neurodivergent Disruption Coach and Unconventional Strategist based in Connecticut. With over 17 years of experience in nonprofit management, leadership development, and program design, she specializes in helping people and organizations break free from limiting narratives and build spaces where authenticity and impact thrive. Through coaching, facilitation, and Reiki healing, Teresa supports women, non-binary, and gender-diverse folks in rediscovering their power, creating meaningful change, and building lives that feel true to who they are. She brings both professional expertise and lived experience to her work, blending strategy with compassion to spark lasting transformation.

MARY-K O'SULLIVAN, LMFT, LADC, LPC, has been working as a Clinical Manager and Clinical Trainer for over 30 years. She has worked in both the private and public sectors in the fields of criminal justice, substance use disorders, co-occurring disorders, and clinical supervision in both inpatient and outpatient programs. She has worked as a trainer for the Department of Corrections, the Judicial Department, the Department of Children and Families, the Department of Social Services, UCONN Medical School, the Department of Education, and the Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services in the State of Connecticut as well as working as a Clinical Preceptor for the SARP program at the Groton Naval Submarine Base. She has trained both Nationally and Internationally, including spending 10 years training with David Powell, PhD. and spending time in Singapore assisting their treatment system leaders in developing skills in co-occurring disorders treatment. She currently provides training and/or clinical supervision and oversight to Private Non-profits, DOC staff, DCF staff, DOL staff, CSSD staff including adult and juvenile probation officers, parole officers, juvenile residential services staff, bail staff, women's and family matters staff, clinicians, case managers, and medical staff.

ASHLEY ROGERS, LCSW, is a Licensed Clinical Social Worker who currently oversees the Safety Education & Training Unit for the Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services. She received her master's degree in clinical/medical social work from Boston University and has over 17 years of experience working in the behavioral health field providing both direct care to clients and families, as well as clinical supervision to staff. Ashley has had the pleasure of teaching both clinical and non-clinical behavioral health staff for over 12 years, instructing courses on topics such as self-care, vicarious trauma, de-escalation, effective communication, clinical supervision, and crisis intervention. In addition, Ashley is certified by the State of Connecticut Police Officer Standards and Training Council as a civilian instructor, which has allowed her to teach Certified Police Officers and Recruits how to respond to individuals experiencing a mental health crisis, which includes a simulation and seminar on interacting with individuals who may be hearing distressing voices. While a Vermonter at heart, Ashley currently resides in Connecticut with her husband and 3 beautiful children.

CHRISTINE SAARI, MA, E-RYT 200, C-IAYT, navigating her own path through anxiety and trauma has instilled in Christine a deep-seated passion for helping others find their way. As a co-founder of Yoga Therapy Associates, Christine specializes in aiding those with anxiety and trauma, emphasizing practices that are both empowering and approachable. Her strength lies in her ability to listen and adapt, individualizing yoga therapy to resonate with each person's unique needs and preferences. Offering online and in-person sessions in Madison and New Haven, Christine's approach is a blend of empathy, expertise, and genuine desire to guide others towards healing.

JENNIFER SPIRITO, LCSW, with over two decades of experience across diverse clinical settings, including the DMHAS Young Adult Services (YAS) program, in-patient hospital medical units, community mental health agencies, and private practice. She is an EMDRIA Certified Therapist and an EMDRIA Approved Consultant, specializing in Complex Trauma and First Responders. As one of the Clinical Directors of the Fairfield County Trauma Response Team, Jennifer plays a leadership role in assisting first responders and community members affected by critical incidents through education, therapy, and community outreach. In addition to her clinical practice, Jennifer offers educational training and consultation for fellow therapists focused on EMDR and special populations. She is passionate about supporting other clinicians in building fidelity and confidence in trauma treatment. Her clinical work is grounded in the belief that EMDR is a powerful and effective modality for healing, and she brings this passion into each of her roles.

RAYMOND TAFRATE, Ph.D., is an associate professor and clinical psychologist at Central Connecticut State University, as well as a fellow and supervisor at the Albert Ellis Institute for Behavior Therapy. He is also an author, consultant, and trainer.

ELSA WARD, MS, CAC, is the Director of Recovery and Community Affairs, for Connecticut's Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services (DMHAS). She represents DMHAS in national organizations and events as well as helping to ensure meaningful contact, input, and dialogue with diverse representatives of the recovery community throughout Connecticut. Prior to coming to DMHAS, Ms. Ward held a variety of roles over the past 22 years in the private non-profit world, primarily focused on helping those with co-occurring disorders. This has included more traditional settings such as residential, intensive outpatient and detox, then branching out into homeless outreach and engagement programs, supportive housing, peer recovery support and then designing and implementing a paid work apprentice program for people with barriers preventing them from competitive employment. Ms. Ward has an Associate Degree in Drug and Alcohol Counseling and is a Certified Addictions Counselor (CAC) and Bachelor and Master Degrees in Human Services. Ms. Ward brings with her the very essence of empowering people with MH/SUD/COD towards change.

JOHN WATTS D.C.J., is a retired Chief Probation Officer with 20 years of experience working at the State of Connecticut Judicial Branch, Court Support Services Division (CSSD). Dr. Watts has taught at Gateway Community College since 2016. He is a national trainer and consultant with the SAMHSA's GAINS Center and Policy Research Associates and holds certifications as a Criminal Justice Addiction Professional (CCJP) and Forensic Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (F-CBT).

BRENDA WESTBERRY is the President and Founder of Westberry Consulting where she has been involved in providing training and workshops for community organizations and agencies throughout the country. She is a retired Adult Probation Chief from the Connecticut Judicial Branch with over 34 years of experience in working with the criminal justice population, substance abuse treatment agencies, the addicted client population and recovery organizations. Brenda is a 21-year veteran professor in the Sociology, Anthropology, Criminology, and Social Work, Department at Eastern Connecticut State University, A faculty member and Instructor for the NE-ATTC, at Brown University, The New England School of Addiction Studies and the New England School of Best Practices. Brenda is a consultant for the Black Addiction Counselor Education (BACE) program through ADCARE where she provides training for addiction professionals. Brenda is an active member of the NAAP, NACSW.