



2025 CHEAC Annual Meeting Workshop Session Biographies

Equity Roles in California's Local Governments: What Equity Looks like when our Country is at a Crossroads

Melissa Jones, Executive Director

Melissa Jones has served as Executive Director of the Bay Area Regional Health Inequities Initiative (BARHII) for a decade, building on its strong foundation as a collaborative of local health departments to deepen its impact on health equity. Under her leadership, BARHII has expanded its role—maintaining its core commitment to governmental public health while also becoming a bridge to community-driven efforts addressing the root causes of health inequities, such as housing instability, racial injustice, and economic exclusion.

During the COVID-19 crisis, Melissa ensured that the voice of public health was central to state and local policy responses. She helped secure eviction protections and expanded paid sick leave by positioning health departments as advocates for community well-being. She and her team created California's equity officer model for emergency response, now adopted statewide, and she has trained over 1,500 public officials in adaptive leadership for racial equity.

Melissa's leadership is grounded in the belief that government systems should respond in real time to community vision. Through BARHII, she has built the infrastructure to support local leaders on the front lines—offering research, communications, and moral support to help win policies that expand housing affordability, protect tenants, and increase worker protections.

Prior to BARHII, Melissa managed a \$600 million community investment portfolio at the Local Initiatives Support Corporation (LISC), directing funds to housing, education, and entrepreneurship in Boston's historically Black neighborhoods.

Under her leadership, BARHII is now creating a National Action Lab, a national platform to accelerate innovation in health equity. Action Lab training pilots have served over 2,000 people, and its first major special project—the Black Housing Advisory Taskforce—has brought together Black-led developers to design communities rooted in prosperity, belonging, and reparations to begin the process of building communities for Black health.

Melissa completed doctoral coursework in the UN Executive Doctorate in Governance at Maastricht University. She is a two-time Center for Community Investment fellow and an Atlantic Fellow for Racial Equity. Her work has appeared in NPR, CalMatters, and the San Francisco Chronicle.

Sefanit Mekuria, MD, MPH, Director of Public Health

Dr. Sefanit (Sofe') Mekuria is board certified in Pediatrics and Preventive Medicine and started at Contra Costa Health Services in 2016 during her Preventive Medicine Residency. After her preventive medicine residency, Dr. Mekuria continued with Contra Costa Health and supported several programs and projects throughout public health; and served as the COVID-19 operations section chief during the COVID-19 response. After the COVID-19 response, Dr. Mekuria supported all public health programs as medical director for public health but focused on her work with the HIV/STI team, Communicable Disease team, Public Health Clinics, Family Maternal and Child Health Program, and the Community Wellness and Prevention team. Currently, Dr. Mekuria is working in the juvenile hall as a provider and supports improvement work within detention. She is the Director of Public Health, the STI controller, and serves as one of the Deputy Health Officers for Contra Costa County.

Jeremy Scruggs, MEd, Racial and Health Equity Officer

Jeremy Scruggs is a public health professional and equity strategist committed to advancing equity, community voice, and systems transformation. Originally from Holly Springs, Mississippi, Jeremy earned his Bachelor of Social Work and Master of Higher Education and Student Personnel from the University of Mississippi. His passion for creating more equitable and inclusive systems as a student led him to serve as a Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) practitioner across multiple higher education institutions, including the University of Mississippi, UC Santa Barbara, and California State University, Long Beach.

Jeremy later transitioned into public health, becoming the inaugural Racial and Health Equity Team Manager for the City of Long Beach. In this historic role, he laid the groundwork for the City's racial and health equity efforts by developing and implementing strategic initiatives aimed at reducing health disparities and addressing the root causes of inequity across the city. He played a pivotal role in embedding equity into the internal operations of the Long Beach Department of Health and Human Services—leading department-wide transformation efforts that uplifted community voice, emphasized lived experience, and re-centered programs around those most impacted by health inequities.

Through cross-sector partnerships and community-informed strategies, Jeremy helped influence critical policy and operational changes to close equity gaps both programmatically and institutionally. His work has been instrumental in advancing inclusive practices, building organizational accountability, and aligning public health systems with equity principles.

Jeremy now serves as the Racial and Health Equity Officer within the City's Collective Impact Bureau, where he is spearheading the expansion of the newly established Racial and Health Equity Division. In this role, he continues to lead with integrity, vision, and an unwavering commitment to building healthier, more equitable systems for all Long Beach residents.