CENTRALINA
Area Agency on Aging

2026 Annual Aging Conference

Connections That Count

October 16, 2026 at the Harris Conference Center

Session Descriptions

"Who's Actually Managing the Medications? The Gap No One Owns in Senior Care"

-Tori Shiu and Wade Shiu, Get CareBridgeRx

Medication management is one of the most critical and most overlook components of senior care. Across transitions between hospital, home, and assisted living, responsibility for medications is often fragmented, assumed, or unclear. The result is a silent but significant driver of hospital readmissions, adverse events, cognitive decline, and caregiver overwhelm. This session will examine the systemic gap in medication oversight and how it impacts outcomes for older adults and the professionals who serve them. Attendees will gain insight into where breakdowns commonly occur, how to identify high-risk medication scenarios, and what practical steps can be taken to improve coordination across care settings. Through real-world examples and actionable strategies, this presentation will introduce a more structured, pharmacist-led approach to mediation management-helping professionals reduce risk, improve communication, and deliver safer, more effective care.

When Home Maintenance Becomes Healthcare: How Older Adults Can Improve Safety and Well-being Through Home Repairs

-Carrie Black, Rebuilding Together of Greater Charlotte

This talk highlights everyday home hazards and shows homeowners how small, manageable repairs can make a big difference. By learning these straightforward fixes, participants can create a safer, healthier environment while gaining a sense of independence and pride in caring for their homes.

Developing a Funding Strategy and Winning Grants
-Lisa Firmender, Mecklenburg County Adult Services Division

Grants serve as a cornerstone of sustainable funding for senior programs, especially in today's rapidly evolving economic climate. Amid rising costs and shifting priorities, grants empower underserved communities to implement innovative, inclusive solutions while fostering long-term resilience. This presentation includes institutional readiness, diversifying funding sources, building a strategic plan, partnerships and collaborations, and a winning grant proposal structure. This is an interactive opportunity for participants.

Intentional Community Gardens: A third space to grow health and wellness
-Cynthia Hancock PhD, FAGHE, FSGS, FSPO, UNC Charlotte Gerontology

An interdisciplinary team from UNC Charlotte Gerontology NC State's Plants for Human Health Institute, UMBC's Erickson School of Aging Studies, FLG Farms, Cardinal Direction Qualitative Research Consulting, and The Park Community Development Corporation (co-developers of Gilfield Park's 55+ affordable housing in Charlotte, NC) worked together to create and evaluate the impact of the intentional gardening space at Gilfield Park. These gardens present a unique opportunity for all ages to engage in the construction, preparation, planting and harvesting of produce that benefits the residents of Gilfield Park across several domains of wellness. Intergenerational gardening programs, such as this, serve as dynamic spaces where older adults and younger generations come together to cultivate not only plants but also meaningful relationships, lifelong learning, and holistic well-being. We will share the results of a systematic evaluation of the impact of the gardens obtained through interview and focus groups. We will also describe the therapeutic horticulture sessions, designed to enhance mental, physical, and social health. Attendees will gain insight into how community-driven programming can be tailored to meet the needs of older adults while fostering sustainable food production, environmental stewardship, and healthier living. Join us to explore the power of gardening as a bridge between generations, a catalyst for social connection, and a transformative tool for improving quality of life in aging communities. Whether you are a researcher, practitioner, or community partner, this session will equip you with practical strategies for designing impactful, intergenerational gardening programs.

From Planning to Impact: A Full-Circle Approach to Senior Center Programming

-Anna Claire Kelly and Kalyn Adams, Davidson County Senior Services

This session explores a practical, full-circle approach to senior center programming. From biannual planning and structured checklists to execution, evaluation, and continuous improvement. Participants will learn how to use surveys and cost analysis to assess impact and bring meaningful data back into planning discussions. Walk away with a clear, repeatable process for creating programs that are intentional, effective, and responsive to participant needs.

You Can't Pour from an Empty Cup

-Venitra White-Dean, The Frankie Mae Foundation

The importance of self-care during the caregiving journey, and beyond. This session will help participants recognize that self-care is essential, not optional, by highlighting its impact on physical health, mental well-being, and their ability to sustain caregiving over time. It will also equip participants with simple, realistic self-care strategies they can incorporate into their daily routines, empowering them to take small, consistent steps toward reducing stress and preventing burnout.

Eliciting Patient Healthcare Goals

-Beth Rosenburg, Atrium Health

This presentation, Eliciting Patient Healthcare Goals, provides an overview of advance care planning with a focus on helping adults particularly older adults reflect on values, choose a healthcare agent, and communicate goals of care. It distinguishes advance care planning from advanced directives, offers practical conversations strategies for patients, families, and clinicians, and includes North Carolina specific guidance alongside generally approachable education. The presentation emphasizes normalizing these conversations, supporting person centered decision making and equipping participants with tools and resources to align healthcare decisions with what matters most.

Connecting to Advocacy in Your Own Backyard
-Kay Castillo and Bliss Pointer, NC Coalition on Aging

As North Carolina communities experience rapid growth in the senior and older adult populations, the need to elevate the voices and experiences of older adults has never been greater. This session explores key demographic trends affecting aging services and helps participants understand why policy and funding decisions have real impacts on individuals and families in their communities. Participants will learn practical, appropriate ways to share information, build awareness, and tell meaningful stories that highlight the value of aging services. Attendees will leave with clear, actionable tools they can use, within their roles, to support informed decision-making at the local, state, and federal levels.

Disability Awareness-How to be a Disability Ally
-Samantha Nevins, Disability Rights & Resources

This engaging informative session will empower attendees with the tools they need to provide excellent customer service to older adults and others with disabilities. It will cover practical strategies for complying with Title III of the Americans with Disabilities Act, creating welcoming and inclusive environments, and training staff and volunteers to use appropriate, respectful language and behavior in all client/patient interactions.

"More" is Not a Number: State and Regional Approaches to Address Healthcare
-Andy MacCracken, Trish Farnham, and Kim Schnitzler, NC Center on the Workforce for Health

The healthcare and LTSS workforce crisis affect every North Carolinian. In this session, staff from the NC Center on the Workforce for Health and South Piedmont AHEC will provide a data-informed, North Carolina-specific overview of state and regional efforts to address this growing challenge.

The Power and Potential of Neurodiversity
-Teepa Snow MS, OTR/L, FAOTA

Although recent progress has been made towards inclusivity of neurodiversity, stigma and implicit bias unfortunately still exist. Many do not even realize that they may have an us versus them bias towards those living with dementia, autism, developmental disability, or other forms of neurodiversity. Or they assume that those living with these conditions are incompetent, no longer have their own opinions, cannot live independently, or demonstrate 'behaviors' such as aggression or agitation. In this session, learners will recognize the many implicit biases surrounding neurodiversity, and important ways to help reduce stigma. It will encourage focus on recognizing abilities, strengths, and skills of individuals. The session will also address the goal of keeping individuals independent and engaged in community as much as possible, and important distinction of supporting rather than taking care of those living with neurodiverse brains.

Addressing Malnutrition at the AAA and Local Level-Lessons Learned
-Laura Borth
National Association of Nutrition and Aging Services Programs (NANASP)

Since 2020, the OAA nutrition program has been tasked with the goal of reducing malnutrition. State units on Aging and AAAs are now required to address malnutrition in their plans. Over two years, we ran national learning collaboratives for each group with support from ACL's Nutrition & Aging Resource Center. Come to learn how states and AAAs have tackled this task and walk through sample programs being run by local programs. You will leave with ideas for implementing malnutrition reducing programs in your own organization and some updated statistics on malnutrition risk in OAA participants.

Support for the Journey: Grief and Loss
-Amanda Buck, Carolina Caring

I just lost someone. Are my feelings normal? What should I say (or do) when someone I know is grieving? If these questions resonate with you, this is a must attend session. This presentation explores how grief affects us physically, emotionally, and spiritually. Participants will gain an understanding of the grief process, practical tools for navigating loss, and meaningful ways to support themselves and others with compassion, connection, and hope along the journey.

Encore Careers: Helping Older Adults Re-Enter or Stay in the Workforce
-Christen Robinson, Centralina Workforce Development

Older adults are increasingly staying in or returning to the workforce after age 50, often for reasons that look very different from earlier career stages. This session explores what "second-act careers" look like today and how workforce, aging and community partners can better support older adults seeking meaningful, sustainable employment. The presentation will highlight common barriers older workers face such as age bias, technology challenges, caregiving responsibilities, and changing work preferences while sharing practical strategies to help older adults identify transferable skills, explore new career options, and connect with age-friendly employers. Participants will also discuss how collaboration across systems can strengthen employment outcomes and economic stability for older adults.

The Crisis Playbook: What Aging Professionals Need to Know Before It's Too Late
-Katherine Whillet, Willett Legal, PLLC

When an older adult suddenly requires higher levels of care or skilled nursing, families are often unprepared and forced to make urgent decisions with significant legal and financial consequences. Aging professionals are frequently the first to recognize these crisis- but may not have all the tools to guide families effectively through them. This session provides a practical "crisis playbook" for professionals working with aging populations. Attendees will learn how to identify early warning signs, understand decision-making authority, avoid common Medicaid and financial pitfalls, and recognize when legal intervention is necessary. Through real-world examples, this session will empower providers to better support families, reduce delays in care, and help prevent costly mistakes.

SHIIP and Senior Medicare Patrol: Your Reliable Connection for Medicare Open Enrollment Assistance
-Lauren Heavner and Jeanie Schepisi, NCDOI

Our presentation will include an overview of the SHIIP and SMP programs with a focus on the 2026 Medicare Open Enrollment period.

Missed Opportunities: Identifying Frailty in At-Risk Older Adults Before They Fall Through the Cracks

-Sherry Leviner, Fayetteville State University

Frailty is often overlooked as normal aging, leading to missed opportunities for early intervention. This interactive session provides a practical approach to identifying physical and cognitive frailty in at-risk older adults and acting before decline occurs.

Turning Grief into Action

-Martin Conway, HomeWatch CareGivers of Charlotte and Mooresville

A Story of how I turned the diagnosis and death of my younger brother to ALS into a new chapter focusing on care, love and compassion.

GUIDE - Guiding an Improved Dementia Experience

-Cindy Kincaid, Centralina Area Agency on Aging

Introducing GUIDE (Guide an Improved Dementia Experience), a new Medicare program focused on improving care coordination, enhancing support for family caregivers, and helping individuals with dementia remain safely in their homes and communities for as long as possible.

Veterans Directed Services

-Molly O'Day Jones, Centralina Area Agency on Aging

Learn about Veteran-Directed Care (VDC), a VA program that helps veterans age in place by directing their own services and supports. In this presentation, an overview of the program, explanation of the Super Hub model, and shared insights from an options counselor experience will be reviewed.

Supporting Brain Health in Our Community

-Deborah McMillan-Key, Alzheimer's Association

Overview of Alzheimer's disease and other dementias, as well as services provided by the Association. Discussion will include risk factors affecting brain health and Provide tips and strategies to maintain a healthy brain.