FOUNDATION FOR HEALTH LEADERSHIP & INNOVATION

MOVING PEOPLE AND IDEAS INTO ACTION

2026 Legislative Breakfast

Tuesday, June 2, 2026

9:00 AM - 11:00 AM

8:30 AM

Pre-Event Networking Session

*By invitation only***

9:00 AM

Registration & Check-In

Check-in, breakfast, and networking

9:30 AM

Keynote Speakers

- **Kim Schwartz,** Board Chair, FHLI
- **Dr. Rachel Keever,** President & CEO, FHLI
- **Dr. Shannon Dowler**, MD, CPE, FAAFP
- **Zil Joyce Dixon Romero**, State Government Affairs Manager, National Rural Health Association

10:00 AM

Policy Panel Discussion

- **Shannon Meadows Allison,** BSBA, RN, WHNP Student, Duke University '26
- **Stephanie N. Kiser**, RPH, Executive Director, Rural Pharmacy Health Initiative and Professor at UNC Eshelman School of Pharmacy
- **Dr. Luisa McLean**, DO, Family Medicine Doctor, Resident, Primary Care Doctor, Duke Primary Care Oxford
- **Marguerite Peterseim**, Government Affairs and Policy Coordinator, National Rural Health Association
- **Dr. Shawn Howerton**, CEO, Sampson Regional Medical Center
- **Jessica Williams**, LCHMC, Broken Things Farm and Therapy
- **April Cook**, CEO, Association of NC Free and Charitable Clinics
- **Alex Green**, DMD, MPH, Chief Dental Officer, Appalachian Mountain Health

10:55 AM

Closing Remarks

- **Dr. Rachel Keever**, President & CEO, FHLI

Speakers & Panelists

Ben Popkin, JD, MPH

Benjamin Popkin, JD, MPH
Founder of Popkin Strategies

Benjamin Popkin, JD, MPH, is the founder of Popkin Strategies, LLC, where he advises clients on government affairs across the health, insurance, and legislative sectors, and also operates a legal practice focused on regulatory, administrative, and contract law. He previously served as Assistant Secretary for Legislation at the North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services and held senior government affairs roles at both DHHS and the North Carolina Department of Insurance, including leading the state's Affordable Care Act implementation efforts. Ben began his career as a staff attorney at the North Carolina General Assembly and holds degrees in law and public health from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

Dr. Shannon Dowler, MD, CPE, FAAFP

Dr. Shannon Dowler, MD, CPE, FAAFP
Family Physician and Health Policy Consultant

Dr. Shannon Dowler is a family physician and health policy consultant who lives in the northernmost reaches of Madison County, the "Jewel of the Blue Ridge," where she has far more cows, goats, and chickens than humans nearby. Her clinical practice is at a Federally Qualified Health Center. In that role, Dr. Dowler serves as an HIV provider in the Ryan White program, which serves 18 of the surrounding western North Carolina counties. In July of 2025, she was featured on the NY Times Daily podcast in an interview focused on the particularly harmful rural impacts of HR1. She is a board member of the American Academy of Family Physicians and a past Chief Medical Officer for NC Medicaid under both Secretaries Cohen and Kinsley.

Zil Joyce Dixon Romero, MPM
Senior State Government Affairs Manager
National Rural Health Association

As the Senior State Government Affairs Manager at the National Rural Health Association, Zil analyzes state-level rural health trends, identifies model legislation, and implements strategic approaches to interact with state government officials and stakeholders. He previously participated in the Obama Foundation's 2023 LeadersUSA program and has interned on Capitol Hill for several Members of Congress. He is particularly passionate about expanding opportunities in rural communities, demonstrating how advocacy can translate from patient care to policy change, and advancing pragmatic solutions grounded in evidence-based best practices.

Zil Joyce Dixon Romero, MPM

Dr. Alex Green, DMD, MPH
Chief Dental Officer
Appalachian Mountain Health

Dr. Green is a lifelong resident of Western North Carolina and a native of Spruce Pine. His career has focused on developing safety-net dental facilities, including the establishment of multiple brick-and-mortar, mobile, and portable clinics for community health centers across the region. His professional interests include expanding access to oral healthcare in underserved communities, advancing equitable care, and improving community oral health outcomes.

Dr. Alex Green, DMD, MPH

Shannon Meadows Allison, BSBA, RN, WHNP-S
WHNP Student, Duke '26
Duke University School of Nursing

Shannon Allison is a registered nurse, Women's Health Nurse Practitioner student at Duke University School of Nursing, and rural health advocate from Western NC. She has deep Appalachian roots and brings lived experience to her work. She has professional experience in nursing, nonprofit leadership, supply chain management, and community outreach, with a focus on improving access to women's health care, chronic disease support, preventive care, and community-centered health education in rural regions. She is passionate about strengthening connections between healthcare systems and the communities they serve through innovative outreach, storytelling, interdisciplinary collaboration, and nurse-led care. Shannon is the founder of Meadows Collaborative Health & Consulting, an emerging initiative focused on rural women's health, chronic illness advocacy, and community-centered healthcare innovation.

Shannon Meadows Allison, BSBA, RN, WHNP-S

Jessica Williams, LCHMC

Jessica Williams, LCHMC
Founder and Owner of Broken Things Farm and Therapy

Jess Williams is the founder and owner of Broken Things Farm in Goldston, NC. Jess received a bachelor's degree in education from Iowa State University and a master's in special education with a focus on autism from Concordia university in St. Paul, MN. After 8 years working in the public school system as a special education teacher, she completed a master's degree in clinical counseling with an emphasis on substance use from East Carolina University. At Broken Things Farm, Jess and her team utilize a breakthrough approach that merges sustainable living with hands-on farm-based therapy. As a clinician, Jess specializes in supporting neurodivergent and LGBTQIA+ folx and their families as they navigate identity, relationships, and self-discovery.

Dr. Shawn Howerton, M.D.

Dr. Shawn Howerton, M.D.
Chief Executive & Chief Medical Officer
Sampson Regional Medical Center

Dr. Shawn Howerton, M.D. is a Board-Certified Family Medicine physician who has served in executive leadership at Sampson Regional Medical Center for fifteen years, including the past thirteen as both Chief Executive Officer and Chief Medical Officer. In addition to his primary specialty, he holds board certification in Clinical Informatics. A passionate advocate for rural healthcare, he is credited with successfully leading one of North Carolina's few remaining independent community hospitals, preserving access to care despite increasing industry consolidation.

Stephanie N. Kiser, RPH, BSPharm

Stephanie N. Kiser, RPH, BSPharm
Executive Director of the Rural Pharmacy Health Initiative and Professor at UNC Eshelman School of Pharmacy

Stephanie Norris Kiser, a native of rural Eastern North Carolina, has more than three decades improving access to care in rural and medically underserved communities through clinical practice, health system leadership, community engagement, and pharmacy education. Her work focuses on integrating pharmacists into interprofessional care teams to improve medication access, chronic disease management, and social determinants of health, while leading grant-funded initiatives that support rural pharmacy transformation. Her scholarship includes publications on rural health, pharmacy deserts, and innovative care models. A Fellow of the National Rural Health Association, she is recognized for her leadership in education, community-engaged practice, and community partnership.

April Cook
Chief Executive Officer
NC Association of Free and Charitable Clinics

April Cook is a proud fourth-generation North Carolinian who has called Concord home for over 30 years, grounding her life in faith, community, and service. For more than two decades, she championed access to care as Co-Founder and Executive Director of the Lake Norman Community Health Clinic, helping thousands of uninsured North Carolinians receive affordable, quality care. She now serves as CEO of the NC Association of Free and Charitable Clinics, leading advocacy, research, public relations, and resource development for free and charitable clinics statewide.

April Cook

Marguerite Peterseim, MPH
Government Affairs and Policy Coordinator
National Rural Health Association

Marguerite Peterseim serves as a Government Affairs and Policy Coordinator at the National Rural Health Association (NRHA), where she supports policy development, analysis, and advocacy across key rural health priorities. In this role, she works closely with program staff to advance NRHA's policy agenda, drafts regulatory comments and policy materials, tracks federal legislative and administrative activity, and provides technical assistance and communications support to members. She also contributes to the planning and execution of NRHA's annual Policy Institute, including agenda development, stakeholder engagement, and event coordination.

Marguerite Peterseim, MPH

Dr. Luisa McLean, DO
Family Medicine Doctor, Resident, Primary Care Doctor
Duke Primary Care Oxford

Dr. Luisa McLean is a bilingual family medicine resident physician passionate about rural and community healthcare. She is dedicated to building stronger, healthier communities through compassionate care, advocacy and education.

Dr. Luisa McLean, DO

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