

# Jeffress Trust Awards Program in Research Advancing Health Equity

2025 Awardees

## *Partnership/Collaborative Establishment Award*

**Sabrina Burress, MA HS, MA CMHC, LPC, NCC**

**ARROW Project**

**In partnership with Shenandoah LGBTQ Center, Life Works Project Inc. & Gypsy Hill House**

**Project Title:** Enhancing Mental Health Equity: Evaluating Non-Crisis Mobile Mental Health Services



*Sabrina Burress, MA HS, MA CMHC,  
LPC, NCC, Executive Director*

### **Project Summary**

The primary objective of this project is to enhance access to mental health services for underserved populations, particularly in low-income, and marginalized communities. By leveraging mobile health technologies, this initiative seeks to reduce barriers to care, such as geographic isolation, financial constraints, and stigma, while improving mental health outcomes. Long-term, the project aims to integrate non-crisis mental health services into routine healthcare systems, ensuring that mental health support is accessible, equitable, and sustainable for all individuals.

### **Impact of Award**

“ARROW Project is excited about this grant opportunity and what it means to the longevity of our community-facing programming. The Jeffress Trust Award will provide the critical resources needed to launch and sustain this research on non-crisis mobile mental health services. With this support, we will be able to conduct rigorous, mixed-methods studies that evaluate accessibility, quality, and equity outcomes for underserved populations. The award will enable us to continue to engage directly with communities, collect and analyze data, and generate invaluable recommendations for scaling mobile mental health services in our community and beyond. Ultimately, this funding will advance our capacity to identify best practices, reduce barriers to care, and promote health equity by ensuring that mental health services are more accessible, equitable, and effective across diverse communities.”



**HEALTH  
RESOURCES  
IN ACTION**

## *Partnership/Collaborative Establishment Award*

**Sandra Dewar, PhD, RN, FAES, FAAN**

**Virginia Commonwealth University School of Medicine**

**In partnership with The Epilepsy Foundation**

**Project Title:** Developing Culturally Relevant Media To Bridge Information Gaps For African Americans With Uncontrolled Epilepsy: A Community Collaboration



*Sandra Dewar, PhD, RN, FAES, FAAN, Assistant Professor*

### **Project Summary**

Uncontrolled epilepsy is an unpredictable and highly stigmatized condition. In the US, incidence varies by race and is three times higher in African Americans than in Caucasians<sup>1,2</sup>. Racial disparities in this population are evidenced by lack of regular neurological care, poor treatment adherence, and less likelihood to participate in safety and wellness behaviors<sup>3</sup>. Low health literacy in people with epilepsy is well documented and negatively impacts the extent to which people actively participate in health-related decisions. Members of VCU's epilepsy team recently conducted an exploratory study with African American epilepsy patients. Not knowing others with epilepsy and not talking about it were associated with social isolation, being uninformed, and having reduced quality of life.

### **Impact of Award**

"The Jeffress Trust award will enable a high quality, enduring video series to be professionally produced. Our community advisory board comprising people impacted by epilepsy, and all community participants will receive compensation for contributing their experiences. Funding will also make it possible to test the series in small focus groups prior to official statewide launch. By placing the voices of illness experts at the heart of our messaging, this project seeks to elevate the visibility of an often-overlooked community- African Americans in Virginia who live with epilepsy. The support of the Jeffress Trust makes this vital work possible."



## Partnership/Collaborative Establishment Award

### Evelyn B. Kelly, MPH

Institute for Public Health Innovation

In partnership with Prince William Health District (PWHD), Edu-Futuro, National Alliance on Mental Illness Prince William Chapter (NAMI PW)

**Project Title:** Community Engagement to Reduce Structural Language Barriers to Healthcare Access and Inclusion Along the Route 1 Corridor in Prince William County



*Evelyn Kelly, MPH, Director, Strategic Initiatives*

### Project Summary

In partnership with the Prince William Health District (PWHD), Edu-Futuro, National Alliance on Mental Illness Prince William Chapter (NAMI PW), and other local community-based organizations, the Institute for Public Health Innovation (IPHI) will investigate a culturally competent model for disseminating relevant health information and addressing healthcare hesitancy among immigrant communities along the Route 1 Corridor in Prince William County. This research will expand on the 2025 Community Health Assessment (CHA) to engage residents in identifying the root causes of health disparities.

### Impact of Award

“The Jeffress Trust Award will allow us to advance community-driven approaches to understanding and addressing health disparities in Prince William County, Virginia. With this support, we are engaging residents through participatory mapping and community feedback sessions to better identify barriers to health and opportunities for systems change. The award provides critical resources to strengthen cross-sector collaboration, expand training opportunities, and elevate resident voices in shaping local health priorities. Ultimately, this project will guide more equitable strategies to improve access to care and enhance social supports, while building a model for community-led interventions that can be replicated in other regions’



*Michele Burton, MSPH, MPA @IPHI*



*VOICE Meeting*



*Diane Anderson, DrPH, MPH, @PWHD*



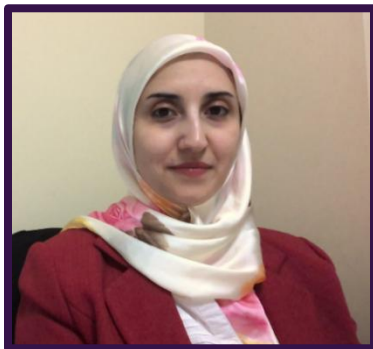
## Partnership/Collaborative Establishment Award

### Reem Sharaf-Alddin, MD, MPH, CPH

CONRAD, Old Dominion University

In partnership with Loving Steps and Child Health Investment Program (CHIP)

**Project Title:** Breaking Barriers to Bacterial Vaginosis Testing: Advancing Prenatal Health Equity in Virginia through Community-Engaged Women-Centered Research and Action (EMPOWER)



*Reem Sharaf-Alddin, MD, MPH,  
CPH Assistant Professor*

#### Project Summary

Bacterial Vaginosis (BV) affects ~27% of pregnant women in the US and disproportionately affects African Americans women more than other racial groups. BV is tested by vaginal swab and treated with antibiotic. Untreated BV is linked to adverse pregnancy outcomes such as preterm birth (PTB). African American women are also at a higher risk of Gestational Diabetes (a predisposing factor of BV). This two-folded disparity is transgenerational as PTB is linked to adverse health outcomes in offspring during adulthood. Despite the significant health consequences of BV, there remains a lack of awareness and screening for BV among pregnant women, contributing to persistent health disparities. Recognizing the significant

influence of socio-behavioral barriers in uptake of screening tests for various health conditions (e.g, screening for cervical cancer, or colorectal cancer), we believe community engagement activities should precede a change in best practice. Therefore, we aim to establish the EMPOWER partnership between ODU (CONRAD, Socio behavioral Scientist, Loving Steps) and The Child Health Investment Program (Community Outreach Program) as equal partners in this community-participatory project.



*CONRAD, Old Dominion University*

The ultimate goal is to advance health equity by empowering women to make informed decisions about healthcare utilization (BV testing) and actively engaging them in community-participatory activities to identify the socio-behavioral barriers that needs to be taken into consideration when implementing BV screening in prenatal care. Project activities will include capacity building; health education; Survey to assess knowledge, attitudes, and perception about BV; in-depth interviews; and focus groups discussions to identify socio-behavioral barriers to BV testing. EMPOWER partnership will pave the road and form

the infrastructure for future population-based research project with wider community engagement to address health inequities. Finally, the findings will be communicated to community, public health policy-makers such as Virginia Department of Health and published in indexed journals for wider scientific knowledge.



## Impact of Award

“The Jeffress Trust Partnership Collaboration Award enabled us to establish EMPOWER, a sustainable community-academic partnership that bridges research and community health needs. By engaging trusted outreach groups, we are building infrastructure that translates research into real-world impact. This foundation will strengthen health promotion and community-engaged efforts to address prenatal health disparities and lay the groundwork for future research and action to advance maternal and child health equity in Eastern Virginia.”



*Hongyun “Tracy” Fu, Old Dominion University*



*Cherell Rivers, Loving Steps*



*Patricia O'Brien, Children's Health Investment Program (CHIP)*





## Partnership/Collaborative Establishment Award

### Arnethea Sutton, PhD

Virginia Commonwealth University School of Medicine

In partnership with First Baptist Church of South Richmond, Virginia Massey Comprehensive Cancer Center (MCCC) & Facts and Faith Fridays

**Project Title:** Advancing Access to Cancer Screening: Building Capacity for A Faith-Based Navigation Program



*Arnethea Sutton, PhD,  
Assistant Professor*

### Project Summary

The American Cancer Society recently reported that while the cancer incidence rate in the United States (U.S.) continues to rise, the death rate is declining. Unfortunately, racial disparities in cancer mortality continue to persist as Black Virginians have the highest cancer mortality rate at 170.7 than their non-Black counterparts (e.g., mortality rate for White Virginians is 150.0). Lack of access to timely and quality screening is one potential contributor to this disparity as it may result in late-stage diagnosis, another disparity burdening the Black community. Recent studies even highlight the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on slow recovery of cancer screening in the Black community. As such, the overall goal of this project is to build capacity for the development and establishment of a novel faith-based cancer screening navigation program to increase access to timely and quality cancer screening care for Black communities of faith and the communities that surround their churches.

### Impact of Award

“Impact: Racial disparities in cancer morbidity and mortality continue to persist nationally and in Virginia. The VCU Massey Comprehensive Cancer Center and the First Baptist Church of South Richmond are grateful for the generous support of the Jeffress Trust Award to support our efforts to address racial disparities in cancer. Funding from the Jeffress Trust Award will further our efforts to build a sustainable partnership that will allow us to identify the key tenets needed to develop and implement a faith-based and community-facing cancer education and screening navigation model.”



*Rev. Dr. Cheryl Ivey Green,  
Executive Minister of First Baptist  
Church of South Richmond*



## Partnership/Collaborative Establishment Award

### Kenda Sutton EL

#### Birth In Color

In partnership with Virginia Commonwealth University & Creating Healthier Communities (CHC) & Lynchburg Hospital

**Project Title:** COLOR Theory: Creating Community Partnerships To Combat Implicit Bias For Equitable Birth Outcomes



*Kenda Sutton EL, Founder,  
Executive Director*

#### Project Summary

The United States has the highest maternal mortality rate among industrialized nations, with 17.4 deaths per 100,000 pregnancies. Virginia closely follows at 15.6 per 100,000. While maternal mortality affects women of all backgrounds, racial disparities are stark, with Black women experiencing the highest risk—47.2 deaths per 100,000, more than twice the rate of white women (18.1). These disparities stem from systemic factors such as limited access to quality healthcare, provider bias, and social determinants of health, highlighting the urgent need for policy and community-based interventions. This project will expand and strengthen community-academic partnerships among Birth in Color, CHC: Creating Healthier Communities, Lynchburg Hospital, and Virginia Commonwealth University to address maternal health inequities among Black birthing people in Virginia. By centering their voices and support networks, the project will: (1) Establish a Community Coalition Board—including Black birthing people, their partners, community doulas, perinatal medical providers, and other stakeholders—to provide feedback on provider implicit bias training. (2) Revise the provider bias training, under the Coalition Board's leadership, to address systemic racism within healthcare. (3) Pilot the revised, community-informed training and evaluate its feasibility, acceptability, and scalability. Led by Birth in Color, our community-academic partnership will leverage the expertise of all collaborators to integrate innovative approaches that dismantle racial disparities in patient experiences and reduce adverse maternal health outcomes.

#### Impact of Award

“Receiving this grant will allow Birth In Color to expand the Maternal Health Hub and fully implement the COLOR Theory framework to address implicit bias and systemic racism in maternal health care. With this investment, we can build and sustain a Community Coalition Board, co-develop community-informed provider training, and integrate lived experiences directly into curriculum and practice. The impact will be profound: reducing racial disparities in maternal morbidity and mortality, strengthening patient-provider communication, and ensuring Black birthing people across Virginia receive respectful, culturally competent care. Beyond immediate outcomes, this grant positions Birth In Color to create a scalable, evidence-based model that can influence statewide policy, strengthen hospital partnerships, and transform maternal health systems for generations to come.”



## Research Award

### Katherine Tossas, PhD

Virginia Commonwealth University School of Medicine

In partnership with Chickahominy Indian Tribe and Tribal Health and Wellness Working Group

**Project Title:** Virginia Tribal Nations TRUTH (Trust, Research, Understand, Teach and Heal) Project



*Katherine Tossas PhD,  
Assistant Professor*

#### Project Summary

Building on the effective community-academic partnership established through the Chickahominy TRUTH (Trust, Research, Understand, Teach, and Heal) Project, the proposed initiative will expand to all 11 Tribal Nations across Virginia to collaboratively investigate the root cause of persistent cancer disparities facing Native Americans statewide, and critically, how to address them. Chickahominy TRUTH project findings highlighted the need to examine how structural barriers (i.e., environmental pollution and healthcare inequities) shape community and individual beliefs about cancer's causes (cancer causal attributions, CCA) and how these beliefs influence individual and community efforts to mitigate cancer risk. To drive meaningful change, we will apply a community-based participatory research approach at the Collaborate and Empower Levels of the Public Participation Spectrum, identifying action opportunities at all levels of the Health Tree.

#### Impact of Award

"The Jeffress Trust Research Award will provide critical support for the Virginia Native Nations Against Cancer (VANNAC) project, the first statewide initiative dedicated to addressing cancer disparities among Virginia's 11 Tribal Nations. With this support, we will be able to work hand-in-hand with Tribal leaders to investigate the structural and social drivers of cancer outcomes, strengthen culturally grounded approaches to prevention and care, develop Community Health Workers from Native Nations, and build sustainable pathways for Tribal-led research and advocacy. This award will not only accelerate urgently needed research but will also honor, center, and amplify the voices of Native communities whose health has too often been overlooked. The Jeffress Trust investment in VANNAC helps lay the foundation for equity in cancer prevention, care, and survivorship across generations of Native families in Virginia."





## Research Award

### **Shanteny Jackson, MA, CCHW, CSAC** **Virginia Community Health Worker Association (VACHWA)** **In partnership with Dr. Obasanjo**

**Project Title:** Evaluating How CHW Training And Certification Improve Employability



*Shanteny Jackson, MA,  
CCHW, CSAC,  
CCHW/VACHWA Executive  
Director*

#### **Project Summary**

Community Health Workers (CHWs) have become foundational in reaching low-income communities around the world with health care. In the US, CHW programs have been initiated to improve health access in culturally, economically, and geographically disadvantaged communities. Because CHWs are chosen from their own communities which have poor health outcomes due to compromised social determinants of health, they also suffer from many of the same poor social determinants of health of the clients they are serving. The healthcare sector is one of the areas where jobs are numerous and growing due to the aging population, and COVID-19 pandemic led to several senior health workers retiring thereby exacerbating the health workforce shortage. Trained and certified CHWs can serve to relieve some of the health manpower shortage. As of 2022, 18 states including Virginia have CHW certification programs managed by state governments. Virginia Community Health Workers Association is a trade organization started in 2014 to advocate and promote the CHW profession.

The main goal of our research is to understand how training and certification of CHWs progresses into a career for people chosen from vulnerable communities to become CHWs. Our conceptual framework is based on the role of education in lifting individuals out of poverty as a well-trodden path. We want to know how becoming a Community Health Worker for people from low-income communities serves as a gateway to sustainable employment and lifting individuals out of poverty.

#### **Impact of Award**

“The Jeffress Trust Research Award is a transformative investment that allows us to both study and shape how meaningful change happens in public health. With this support, we are generating practical evidence on how certification opens pathways to stable careers, while also uplifting Community Health Workers (CHWs) as individuals whose lived experience informs solutions to health inequities. Our partnership unites the rigor of research with the power of CHW-led organizations rooted in community, creating new opportunities for CHWs and expanding access to care where it is needed most. In doing so, we support and empower CHWs, helping them grow professionally and bring their knowledge and skills back into their communities.



Building on this commitment, the award enables us to support 30 CHWs from underserved communities through the full certification process, from training to employment. By following their journeys, our research will generate critical insights into how certification creates stable, long-term careers in healthcare while expanding access to culturally relevant care. Because CHWs are drawn from the very communities they serve, their advancement directly addresses shared barriers to health and well-being. This work demonstrates how workforce development can reduce disparities, expand opportunity for individuals, and foster stronger, more resilient communities.



*Iyabo Obasanjo, PhD,  
MPVM (Lead Researcher)*

At the same time, this award affirms the strength of CHW-led organizations rooted in lived experience. We believe in the power of community action and self-determination—values at the heart of VACHWA and aligned with those of the [National CHW Association](#) (NACHW). This recognition underscores that CHWs, shaped by their own lived experiences, are not only trusted messengers but also critical participants in advancing health equity.

We also take pride in our role as a backbone organization. We are because of the CHW workforce. Our vision is woven into the core tapestry of our communities, where [VACHWA's vision is to see healthier and happier individuals and families](#). By investing in workforce development and creating pathways for economic mobility, we build a stronger, more resourceful, and better-equipped community. This strengthens both individuals and their neighborhoods—the very nucleus of society—and helps advance their trajectories in life.

Finally, the true impact of this award lies in its collective framework. Collective impact brings people and organizations together to design—or redesign—growth opportunities at both personal and professional levels. By supporting community-led initiatives and collaborative action, we demonstrate how collective support is essential to delivering benefits where they are most needed. The Jeffress Trust Research Award makes it possible to empower CHWs, expand economic mobility, and ensure that the communities most impacted have a meaningful role in shaping their own futures.”



*Stephanie Carrington (CHW  
Lead Trainer/CCHW Sr. @  
VDH).*



*Janay Moniz (Project  
Manager)*



*Patrice Shelton (CHW  
Lead Trainer/CCHW  
Sr @ VDH)*

