



## Meet the Speakers

### **Alison Clarke, CTRS, Community Engagement Manager, Sheltering Arms Institute**

Alison Clarke has more than 30 years' experience developing and implementing community-based programs. She received a Bachelor of Science in Recreation and Parks, with a concentration in Therapeutic Recreation Services in 1988 and a Certificate of Gerontology from West Virginia University, Morgantown, West Virginia. In her current role at Sheltering Arms Institute, Alison is responsible for strategic planning, facilitation of community partnerships, program development and operationalizing inaugural community engagement department for new 114 bed inpatient physical rehabilitation hospital. During the past four years, she has

- Developed peer mentor programs for varying diagnosis including mentor recruitment and training
- Developed strategic partnership with national, local, and statewide agencies
- Integrated community partner collaborations into daily operations
- Secured grant funding for integration of community-based referral platform into electronic health record
- Secured grant funded community health worker position for stroke population
- Secured grant funding for development of Caregiver Ambassador program
- Coordination of community education events for varying diagnosis
- Implementation of expansion of community partnerships across the continuum of care

Before joining the SAI team, she created Sheltering Arms Club Rec program, a day recreation program for those in our community who are 18+ living with a lifelong diagnosis or disability. Alison understands the importance of providing resources and programs to help our community through their recovery.

### **Rachel Gibson, MSW, Caregiver Program (CNI Grant)**

Rachel Gibson began her journey with Sheltering Arms Institute (SAI) in February of 2025 through the Virginia Commonwealth Neurotrauma Initiative (CNI) Grant. She received her Bachelor of Social Work with a minor in Psychology from Virginia Commonwealth University in 2019. In 2022, she then decided to pursue her Master of Social Work through the 2-year track graduating in 2024. Since beginning at Sheltering Arms Institute, Rachel has created and implemented several caregiver focused services and support opportunities. These programs include:

- Providing post discharge caregiver services to caregivers of Traumatic Spinal Cord Injury and Traumatic Brain Injury individuals for up to 6 months
- Creation and facilitation of a Caregiver Support Group, open to the public
- Implementation of Caregiver Coffee and Chats for inpatient caregivers to support connection and self-care
- Creation and implementation of a Caregiver Coffee Cart to assist families in feeling welcomed and supported during their time at SAI
- Continuance of the oversight for the Caregiver Ambassador Program
- Incorporation of Trauma Survivors Network (TSN) as a resource for families and patients

Prior to starting at SAI, Rachel worked at a rural Community Services Board serving youth and families through wraparound services, most notably as an Intensive Care Coordinator. While there, she worked with the family, youth, and professional supports to keep youth in the community with their families rather than an out-of-home placement. While in her master's program, Rachel interned at the VCU Health Hospital in the trauma department completing PTSD and Depression screenings on Trauma Patients.



### **Karen Grazionale, Author, Advocate, Activist**

Karen Grazionale advocates for family caregivers through writing, speaking, and research. Her essays have been published in several neurological magazines including BRAIN, by Oxford Press and she has appeared as a guest on several podcasts. Karen also supports caregivers through individual and group sessions. Her goal is to create a supportive community for families throughout their journey. Click the link to learn more: [www.karengrazionale.com](http://www.karengrazionale.com).

### **William C. Walker MD, Professor, VCU Dept PM&R**

William C. Walker, MD, is the Ernst and Helga Prosser Professor and Executive Vice Chairperson in the Department of Physical Medicine & Rehabilitation (PM&R) at Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU). He provides clinical care across the spectrum of TBI in the outpatient and hospital setting at VCU Health Systems and through VCU's affiliation with Sheltering Arms Institute. Dr. Walker focuses on neurologic conditions and has special interest and expertise in treating persons with traumatic brain injury (TBI) of all severities from mild (concussion) to more severe. He also treats people with acquired (non-traumatic) brain injuries, including strokes, tumors, hypoxic, and other causes. Dr. Walker is an acclaimed researcher, with over 170 published peer-reviewed scientific manuscripts, garnered multiple researcher awards, and won multiple federal research grants. Dr Walker is a long-term researcher for the VCU site of the federally designated TBI-Model Systems of Care which studies outcomes after moderate and severe TBI. He is Study Chairperson for the Long-Term Impact of Military-Relevant Brain Injury Consortium (LIMBIC) study on the impact of concussions on brain health among a group of over 3,000 U.S. veterans and service members enrolled at 10 centers across the U.S. Dr. Walker is also co-principal investigator for the VCU HERO study which tests how a treatment called Heart Rate Variability (HRV) Biofeedback may help persons suffering from long-term symptoms after concussion or mild TBI (see URLs for more information on this clinical trial: ( <https://hero-study.org/> ; <https://news.vcu.edu/article/2025/10/vcu-research-in-action-teaching-patients-to-take-a-deep-breath> )

### **Jim Segneri**

I became a member of LSESSI in 1996 following an electrical accident at work in late 1995. After struggling to find medical help for my injury, I saw a television program featuring Steve Marshburn, the founder of LSESSI. After connecting with Steve, I was invited to a conference that changed my life. With the support of Steve and other survivors, I was able to start my recovery journey and find competent medical help. The road to recovery has been long and difficult, but with the group's support and some very skilled doctors, I have made considerable progress. I was out of work and home for three years before returning to school to pursue a new career path. I became a network engineer and later transitioned into teaching and training in technology. Currently, I am a Training and Support Management professional with a strong focus on healthcare software and custom EHR applications (EPIC). I work for VCU Health in Richmond, Virginia, as a Training Lead for the EHR system, responsible for all EHR clinical documentation training. After several years of attending conferences, I was asked to join the Board of Directors. It has become my life's calling to help others avoid the lack of care I experienced and help guide them through the recovery process. We are a volunteer-run and sponsored organization with over 1,400 current and past members. Survivors come to us when they are lost, suffering, and in need of help, and we assist them in finding the path to recovery. Many people are unaware of the debilitating injuries resulting from lightning and electrical accidents. For many these life-changing events have long-term consequences that, while well-documented, are still poorly understood. Many of our members lack resources and do not know where to



turn for help. As survivors supporting survivors, we provide the pathway to identify the help they need and guide them to the right resources. We partner with organizations like the ACLE, Lightning Data Center, NOAA, and the Lightning Safety Week programs. Our board comprises survivors, family members, doctors, and other volunteers who donate their time to help others. We have been doing this for over 33 years, and no one else serves the population we do in the same way. I make every effort to help other survivors feel understood and accepted. Although I still suffer from deficits, I have learned to accept and live with them. I live with my wife of 25 years and our 16-year-old son. We have two dogs and a cat. I love to cook, read as often as I can, and spend time volunteering at my son's school. I volunteer at my church and am also on the HOA board for my neighborhood. While my physical activities are somewhat restricted, I have found alternative ways to participate and live my life to the fullest. Never be a victim always a survivor!

### **Caressa Palmer, MPH, VCU Clinical Research Coordinator**

Caressa Palmer, MPH, is a Clinical Research Coordinator in the Department of Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation at Virginia Commonwealth University. She has advanced training in public health with a focus in Health Promotion. Her research experience spans health behavior and policy, including prior projects addressing gaps in infectious disease care. She currently supports projects examining disparities within brain injury populations, informed by more than a decade of experience working with Veteran and aging communities.

### **Paul F. Aravich, Ph.D., Behavioral Neuroscientist and Professor Department of Biomedical and Translational Sciences, and Division of Geriatrics, and Department of Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation Eastern Virginia Medical School of Mason and Joan Brock Virginia Health Sciences at Old Dominion University**

Paul F. Aravich, PhD, is a Behavioral Neuroscientist and Professor of Biomedical and Translational Research, Geriatrics and Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation at Eastern Virginia Medical School of Old Dominion University. He is former Chair of the Virginia Brain Injury Council, headed its first position paper on the neurobehavioral complications of brain injury, and is a regular presenter to Camp Bruce McCoy of BIAV. He has promoted the new public health view of the dementias adopted by the Commonwealth; has presented for the Michael J. Fox Foundation for Parkinson's Research on the Hill; has presented for the American Brain Coalition---which advocates for 100 million Americans with behavioral and neurological disorders---several times on the Hill; and is a member of an international art therapy-and-the-brain coalition. Finally, he has served the Governor as, e.g., former head of the Virginia Public Guardian and Conservator Advisory Board and as an appointed member to a special Gubernatorial commission to prevent suicide in Service Members, Veterans and their Families. Awards include one of the highest medical education awards in the United States and Canada, and the highest faculty award by the Commonwealth for excellence in teaching, research and service. His most recent funding focused on person-centered care and crisis intervention techniques for nursing home challenging behaviors during emergencies.