

GET TO KNOW THE SPEAKERS!

Lauren Micek Vargas: Know Your Rights: Empowering Juveniles to Navigate Education Systems

Speaker Bio:

Executive Director Lauren Micek Vargas, J.D., co-founded and operates Education Rights Counsel, the sole non-profit entity in Nebraska providing direct representation specifically dedicated to the educational rights of children. She has repeatedly been recognized for her innovative work advancing the legal profession, the administration of justice and public interest. Recently she has been selected as a TOYO (Ten Outstanding Young Omahans) and as one of “40 under 40” (leaders making a significant impact on their business and community early in their careers). Lauren serves on the Boards of Educare and the D2 Center. She and her husband, Tony Vargas, are the proud parents of Ava and Luca.

Session Description:

Juveniles, especially those who are court-involved, highly mobile, or receiving special education services, often face disrupted access to education due to discipline, placement changes, or misinformation about their rights. This interactive, youth-centered session provides clear, practical guidance on education rights and self-advocacy. Using plain language, real-world scenarios, and myth-busting, the presentation addresses school access, discipline, disability protections, nondiscrimination, and educational continuity, while emphasizing trauma-informed engagement, youth voice, and legally accurate, empowering information across school and justice settings.

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Trooper Keith Bell: Community Policing and Youth Engagement

Speaker Bio:

Keith Bell is a veteran law enforcement professional with more than 28 years of combined experience in policing, corrections, and public safety. He currently serves as a Nebraska State Trooper, working in the patrol division with a focus on traffic enforcement, crash investigations, and assisting allied agencies.

Previously, Trooper Bell served as the Troop A Community Services Officer, serving the Omaha metropolitan area. In that role, he provided community programming and training in drug and alcohol awareness, seatbelt safety, internet safety, anti-bullying, recruiting, and mentoring.

He is also a certified instructor in Citizens Response to an Active Killer, Defensive Tactics, and Traffic Incident Management, and has previously served as a CPR and First Aid instructor.

Session Description:

Youth & Community Engagement: Local and National Trends, Tips & Techniques

Building meaningful relationships with youth and the communities we serve is essential to effective law enforcement and child welfare work. This presentation will explore current local and national trends affecting youth engagement, including trust, communication, social media, school safety, and community perceptions of public safety professionals.

Participants will learn practical, relationship-based strategies for engaging youth, families, schools, and community partners. The session will provide real-world tips, communication techniques, and proven approaches that can be applied immediately to strengthen trust, improve collaboration, and create more positive interactions with young people.

Designed for law enforcement and child welfare professionals, the presentation emphasizes connection before correction, authentic engagement, and building partnerships that extend beyond crisis response.

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Nick Zadina & Kyle Kinney: Going Beyond Risk Factors: The Interpersonal Theory of Suicide

Speaker Bios:

Nick Zadina, MA, is Manager of Training and Quality Assurance at the Boys Town National Hotline. He has 15 years of experience in trauma-informed practices, suicidality, and client engagement, and has led initiatives in suicide screening, advocate training, and policy support for survivors of gender-based violence.

Kyle Kinney, LMHP is the program manager of the 988 NE Suicide & Crisis Lifeline and the Nebraska Family Helpline. During his 20-year career serving Nebraska, Kyle has provided support to children in the juvenile justice system, the child welfare and foster care system, at-risk students, as well as the children and families who remain outside “the system.”

Session Description:

This session explores Dr. Thomas Joiner’s Interpersonal Theory of Suicide, which examines the interplay of cognitions, intentions, and capabilities to better understand suicide risk. Participants will learn the theory’s framework, origins, and hypotheses, and how it informs suicide screening, assessment and intervention. Case studies will illustrate practical applications for supporting individuals who disclose suicidal ideation.

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Rachel Culp: Screens, Social Media, and Safety: Supporting Youth in a Digital World

Speaker Bio:

Rachel Culp is a passionate advocate for child safety at Project Harmony, driven by a lifelong commitment to protecting children from abuse and neglect.

With a background in sales and corporate training, Rachel transitioned to the nonprofit sector to make a deeper impact. As a foster parent, mother of four, and former in-home daycare provider, she brings authentic, firsthand insight into the realities of child welfare.

Specializing in online safety, Rachel empowers families and communities with practical tools to navigate digital risks, helping children thrive in today's connected world.

Through her expertise, personal experience, and unwavering dedication, Rachel is creating lasting change for vulnerable children.

Session Description:

Children today grow up as digital natives, shaping how they learn and interact. This session examines how technology, social media, and AI influence adolescent development, behavior, and risk. Participants will learn to identify digital red flags, understand why youth are drawn to online spaces, and gain practical strategies to engage youth, support safer digital behavior, and build trust as credible adults.

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Karmen VanDeWalle: Building a Life Too Big to Throw Away

Speaker Bio:

Karmen VanDeWalle, LIMHP, MSW, is a mental health therapist at The WELL in Columbus, Nebraska, where she works with children, adolescents, adults, and families navigating mental health, trauma, substance use, and complex life circumstances. Her professional experience spans behavioral health, substance use treatment, prevention, community collaboration, and work alongside juvenile justice and other systems serving youth and families. She is passionate about moving beyond labels and challenging behaviors to understand what young people need to feel connected, capable, valued, and hopeful about their futures.

Session Description:

What if youth prevention focused not only on what we want young people to avoid, but on helping them build lives they genuinely want to protect?

Building a Life Too Big to Throw Away explores how professionals across juvenile justice, education, behavioral health, prevention, and community systems can intentionally strengthen the protective factors that help young people thrive. Participants will examine eight essential elements—connection, belonging, identity, competence, purpose, joy, hope, and future orientation—and consider practical ways to build them into everyday interactions with youth.

Through lived experience, professional perspective, case examples, and an interactive activity, participants will shift the question from “How do we stop this behavior?” to “What can we help this young person build?” Attendees will leave with practical strategies for creating a stronger web of protective factors around youth and one concrete commitment they can immediately put into action.