



LABORATORY LEADERS OF TODAY

Cohort 2
2023–2024





Cheryl Achilles

Vermont Agriculture and Environmental Laboratory

Cheryl is the Laboratory Director for the Vermont Agency of Agriculture and Environmental Laboratory and helps facilitate testing needs for programs within the Agency of Natural Resources and the Agency of Agriculture. For nine years, Cheryl had been with the Vermont Department of Health (VDH), starting out in Quality, where she helped the Lab obtain its first ISO 17025 accreditation a year ahead of schedule, and later on as Chief of Microbiology, where she led her team through numerous outbreak responses and situations of concern that touched the lives of humans, animals, and the environment. During her tenure at VDH, Cheryl obtained and managed numerous federal grants that have allowed for expanded testing capabilities in Vermont.



Cynthia Cass, PhD

State Hygienic Lab at the University of Iowa

Dr. Cass serves as the Assistant Director of the Diagnostic and Clinical Division at the State Hygienic Laboratory (SHL) at the University of Iowa where she is responsible for supervising the clinical, environmental microbiology, and newborn screening testing programs, monitors grants, and participates in strategic planning since 2021. She joined SHL in 2020 during the lab's COVID pandemic response, helped develop the wastewater surveillance program, and is Co-PI of the APHL-CDC Legionella Reference Center. She earned a BA in Biology from the University of California, Santa Cruz and a PhD in Microbiology in the Cell and Molecular Biology program at the University of Virginia and has worked in varied fields including public health, RNA splicing, human parasitology, and plant molecular genetics.



Randy Fowler, PhD, D(ABMM)

Tennessee Public Health Laboratory

Dr. Fowler received his B.A. in biology from Wartburg College and completed his PhD in medical microbiology/immunology from Creighton University, where he studied antimicrobial resistance in *Pseudomonas aeruginosa*. After his PhD, he completed a CPEP fellowship in clinical microbiology at the University of Nebraska Medical Center and then completed training in public health, lab management, quality assurance, and safety as a CDC Laboratory Leadership (LLS) Fellow at the Minnesota Public Health Laboratory. After the LLS Fellowship, he joined the NYC Public Health Lab to oversee the mycobacteriology laboratory and eventually the serology, molecular virology, biothreat response, and informatics teams. Currently, Dr. Fowler is the Deputy Laboratory Director of the TN State Public Health Laboratory.



Sam Hallis, PhD, TS (ABB), SM (ASCP) CM

San Diego County Public Health Laboratory (SDCPHL)

Dr. Hallis began her career in the environmental chemistry side and transitioned to the public health laboratory field during her participation in the Lab Aspire Program at UCLA. She worked as a Public Health Microbiologist I/II at Orange County Public Health Laboratory for six years in Bacteriology and Virology/Serology. In 2021, she joined San Diego County Public Health Laboratory as a Supervising Public Health Microbiologist where she relocated the Waters Laboratory and launched ddPCR Beach Water Testing. Dr. Hallis was promoted to Assistant Lab Director in 2022 where she oversees Genomic Epidemiology/Sequencing, Waters, Lab Support, and PHM Training Program.



Kristina Hsieh, DrPH

San Mateo County Public Health Laboratory

Dr. Hsieh received her bachelor's degree in Molecular and Cellular Biology, Masters in Public Health and her Doctorate in Public Health (DrPH) from the University of California, Berkeley. At the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, Dr. Hsieh joined the Alameda County Public Health Department as the County Laboratory Director. She worked with the executive leadership team to implement processes and procedures to improve and streamline the Health Department's COVID-19 pandemic response and enhance disease surveillance across the County. She recently joined the San Mateo PHL as the Laboratory Director and is working to expand Wastewater testing and Sequencing to enhance laboratory testing beyond SARS-CoV-2.



Anna Liza Manlutac, MPH

San Diego County Public Health Laboratory

Anna Liza Manlutac's journey to the United States at 16 marked the beginning of her career in public health. She holds a microbiology degree from UCSD and an MPH from The George Washington University, pursuing a Doctor of Public Health at the University of South Florida. As a LabAspire fellow and Assistant Laboratory Director at the San Diego County Public Health Laboratory, Anna Liza oversees Bacteriology, Rabies, Molecular Virology, ImmunoSerology, Mycobacteriology, LIMS, and Research and Innovation. Additionally, she is the Responsible Official for their select agent program, ensuring compliance and safety. With over two decades of experience in public health, she has responded to numerous outbreaks, contributing to the protection and enhancement of public health. Her career has been gratifying, allowing her to make a tangible impact on San Diego's well-being.



Ruby Rong Ni

Oklahoma Public Health Laboratory

Dr. Ni is the Oklahoma State Public Health Laboratory Director and oversees the day-to-day technical and administrative operations. She completed her internal medicine and general surgery residency after graduating from medical school. She received a master's in clinical laboratory science after working as an infectious disease postdoc fellow at UAB Medical School. She commenced her clinical laboratory/trials career thereafter. She worked as a lab scientist/lead in the UAB hospital, staff scientist/project lead in the biotech startup, and participated in TB BSL-3 lab diagnostics, the National Marrow Donor Program, brain tumor patient treatment, established molecular lab with clinical assay development, etc. She was the Microbiology Lab Manager at LabCorp Regional Laboratory in Birmingham, Alabama before she assumed her current role.



Leonard Peruski, PhD

New York State Department of Health – Wadsworth Center

Dr. Peruski is the Director of the Wadsworth Center, the research-intensive public health laboratory of the New York State Department of Health and one of the oldest and most renowned public health research laboratories in the world. Over his 30-year career Dr. Peruski has spent 17 years internationally developing sustainable laboratory capacity and guiding laboratory-centric public health research in over 70 countries. He assumed the leadership of the Wadsworth Center in May 2023, coming from an extensive international career at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. He has over 80 peer-reviewed publications, book chapters, and patents in microbiology, public health and emerging infectious diseases.



Joseph Reed, PhD

Wyoming State Public Health Laboratory

Dr. Reed is the Wyoming Public Health Laboratory Administrator. He graduated from the University of Nebraska where he focused on microbial physiology. From 2019 through 2022, Dr. Reed's team at the Wyoming Public Health Laboratory successfully worked to rebuild Chemical Testing Program analytical capacity, supported SARS-CoV-2 testing activities, and ensured regulatory compliance across Chemical Testing, Microbiology, and Preparedness Programs. He has expanded partnerships, broadened laboratory testing capacity, trained and retained a highly qualified workforce, and successfully applied for funding for new methods and instrumentation. In 2022, he was promoted into his current role and is excited to continue leading laboratory quality improvement projects, implement new technologies, and ensure regulatory compliance across all programs.



Akiko Saito, MPH, MPA

Oregon State Public Health Laboratory

Akiko is the Business Director for the Oregon State Public Health Laboratory (OSPHL). Before this role, she was the Director of the COVID-19 Response and Recovery Unit (CRRU). Akiko has been at the Oregon Health Authority for 15 years with her tenure in the Health Security Preparedness and Response Program where she acted as the Director of Emergency Operations for the Oregon Health Authority. She led a team of public health emergency planners, Tribal, healthcare and public health emergency preparedness liaisons and AmeriCorps VISTA members to achieve the goal of public health preparedness, community resiliency and health equity for the state of Oregon. Akiko has a master's degree in both Public Health and Public Administration from Portland State University and a bachelor's degree in psychology with a studio art minor from Santa Clara University.



Michael J Stevenson, PhD

New Hampshire Public Health Laboratories

Dr. Stevenson has been involved in the public health laboratory setting since 2010. He worked at the Idaho Bureau of Laboratories for over nine years in a number of roles, including Deputy Lab Director, then he joined the Alaska State Public Health Laboratories for three years as a Public Health Laboratory Scientist leading the special pathogens testing program. He joined the New Hampshire Public Health Laboratories in June 2022 as their Quality Manager, and was promoted to Deputy Lab Director in March 2023, where he oversees operations, quality, and safety. His undergraduate education was at Butler University in Indianapolis, IN, followed with a PhD in Biophysical Chemistry at Stanford University in Palo Alto, CA.



Gordon Vrdoljak, PhD

California Department of Public Health

Dr. Vrdoljak has worked for 35 years in the field of analytical chemistry, mainly focusing on environmental chemistry analysis. He majored in chemistry and geology from the university of Toronto for his BSc, studied landfill clay mineral chemistry for his MSc in Toronto, and worked on soil chemistry of the Amazon rainforest for his PhD at Berkeley. He has worked at UC Berkeley, Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory, Clorox, the California Department of Cannabis Control, and the California Department of Public Health. Dr. Vrdoljak has a new role as Chief of the Division of Environmental Health Laboratories with the California Department of Public Health.



Kathryn Wangsness, MHA

Arizona State Public Health Laboratory

Kathryn is the Assistant Bureau Chief for the Bureau of State Laboratory Services (ASPHL) at the Arizona Department of Health Services (ADHS). Kathryn has been part of the ADHS team since 1997. She began her career at ADHS as a scientist in the Office of Chemistry performing testing on various samples. Since then, she has held roles as a Blood Alcohol consultant, Environmental Laboratory Certification Officer, Quality Assurance Officer and then Manager, and Office Chief of Support Services. In her current role, she leads the Offices of Chemistry, Laboratory Licensure and Certification, and Support Services and Operations.



Jennifer Western

St. Louis County Environmental Health Laboratory

Jennifer is a highly experienced public health laboratory professional with over 22 years of expertise in environmental and clinical testing. She is the Laboratory Director for the Environmental Health Laboratories at the Saint Louis County Public Health. Jennifer has overseen laboratory operations for the past 11 years. Prior to this, she served as the Radiochemistry Laboratory Supervisor and an Environmental Chemist. Jennifer is dedicated to providing accurate and high-quality testing services and is committed to expanding laboratory capabilities to better serve the needs of the Saint Louis community. Her successes include rapidly expanding COVID-19 testing and setting up a new clinical sexual health testing laboratory.



Erika Womack, PhD

Mississippi State Chemical Laboratory

Dr. Womack currently serves as the State Chemist of Mississippi and is the Director of the MSCL (ISO/IEC 17025). As the State Chemist, she is responsible for the promulgation of rules and regulations for the proper enforcement of the laws governing agricultural products. She also is an Associate Research Professor in the Department of Biochemistry and Molecular Biology at the Mississippi State University. Her background is in Molecular Biology and Biochemistry from Mississippi State University where she was formally trained as an analytical chemist. Dr. Womack's post-doctoral appointment was with the USDA-ARS, and she worked as a Laboratory Manager at the University of Alabama at Birmingham after her fellowship.

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