

## Speaker Biographies

### Fiscal Policy Center at Connecticut Voices for Children

14<sup>th</sup> Annual State Budget Forum

February 3rd, 2015

#### **Ellen Shemitz**

##### **Connecticut Voices for Children**

Ellen Shemitz is Executive Director of Connecticut Voices for Children. She is a nationally recognized advocate with over 25 years of public and private sector experience advancing social and civil justice through policy development, advocacy, litigation, media campaigns and public engagement. During her first year as Executive Director of Connecticut Voices for Children, Ellen has worked with Board and Staff to clarify organizational priorities, set a strategic focus, and align research and advocacy priorities within an overarching commitment to equitable opportunity for all children.

Ellen brings with her significant nonprofit management experience, having served as executive director of the New Hampshire Association for Justice, a professional association working to promote civil justice and constitutional rights, and as President of the Children's Alliance of New Hampshire, a state based child advocacy organization. While leading the Children's Alliance of New Hampshire, Ellen chaired the Annie E. Casey Foundation's Kids Count Steering Committee, and founded the New Hampshire Child Advocacy Network, a collaborative association of more than 200 child-serving organizations. A Connecticut native and a graduate of Yale University (B.A.) and Yale Law School (J.D.), Ellen clerked for the Honorable Hugh H. Bownes of the United States Court of Appeals, and represented children with special needs in private practice, before turning her sights to systemic change through advocacy.

#### **Nick Defiesta**

##### **Connecticut Voices for Children**

Nick Defiesta, Fiscal Policy Fellow, joined Connecticut Voices for Children after earning a B.A. in Economics from Yale University. He has worked with Wade Gibson, Director of the Fiscal Policy Center at Connecticut Voices for Children, advocating for tax and budget policies that improve the economic, health, and educational opportunities available to Connecticut families. Prior to joining Voices, Nick reported for the *New Haven Independent*, was an editor of the *Yale Daily News*, conducted research for DataHaven and directed homeowner canvasses with the R.O.O.F. Project. He serves on the regional Volunteer Income Tax Assistance coalition and is the founder of the Young Nonprofit Professionals Network New Haven chapter.

#### **Benjamin Barnes**

##### **Office of Policy and Management**

Benjamin Barnes has served as the Secretary of the Office of Policy and Management (OPM) since January 2011. OPM is the Governor's staff agency in Connecticut and is responsible for all aspects of policy, planning, budgeting and management of state government.

Before joining OPM, Mr. Barnes was the Operating Officer for the Bridgeport Public Schools, overseeing the school system's facilities, transportation, technology and \$215 million budget. Previously, Mr. Barnes was the Director of Operations for the City of Stamford, a department with 250 employees, an annual operating budget of \$43 million and a capital budget of \$40 million. In this capacity, he was responsible for public works, solid waste and recycling, land use and zoning, sewage, parks and recreation, and engineering services. He also served as the Director of Administration and as the Director of Public Safety, Health and Welfare for the City of Stamford. Mr. Barnes has worked as the Government Finance Director for the Connecticut Conference of Municipalities and as a planner for the Cities of Hartford, Connecticut and St. Petersburg, Florida. He holds a Master's degree in Urban Planning from New York University and a Bachelor's degree in History from Swarthmore College.

### **Wade Gibson** **Connecticut Voices for Children**

Wade Gibson, departing Director of the Fiscal Policy Center at Connecticut Voices for Children, has advocated for tax and budget policies that expand opportunity for Connecticut families since he began work for Voices in 2009. He has just accepted a position as Chief of Staff for the Secretary of Commerce in Governor Raimondo's administration in Rhode Island.

Prior to joining Connecticut Voices, Wade was policy director of Ned Lamont's gubernatorial campaign, legislative correspondent for Congressman Lloyd Doggett, a management consultant at Oliver Wyman, and a water-ski instructor at the summer camp he and his parents started in 1995. Wade studied behavioral economics at Princeton University and received his J.D. from Yale Law School. He is an officer in the United States Navy Reserve and lives with his wife in New Haven.

### **Senate President Martin Looney**

Martin Looney currently is in his twelfth term, having been elected to the State Senate in 1993. In January of 2015, Senator Looney was elected by the members of the state Senate to serve as President Pro Tempore, the highest-ranking legislator in the Connecticut General Assembly. Prior to his election as Senate President, Senator Looney served 10 years as Senate Majority Leader. During his career he served six years as Senate Chair of the Finance, Revenue and Bonding Committee; Chairman of the Banks Committee; and one term as Ranking Member of the Judiciary Committee.

During his tenure as State Representative, Looney was appointed an Assistant Majority Leader and served as Chairman of the Planning and Development Committee, the Government Administration and Elections Committee and the Appropriations Judicial Subcommittee, and as Vice-chairman of the Judiciary Committee.

Prior to his election to the General Assembly in 1980, Looney was a Public Information Aide to the Mayor of New Haven and taught English Literature and Composition as an adjunct faculty member at Quinnipiac University and the University of New Haven.

Senator Looney is a graduate of Saint Rose School in New Haven, Notre Dame High School, and is a cum laude graduate of Fairfield University, where at commencement he was awarded Departmental Honors in English and Theology. He was selected as a National Woodrow Wilson Fellow for graduate study and earned a Master's Degree in English from the University of Connecticut.

He received his J.D. Degree in 1985 from the University of Connecticut School of Law and is a partner in the law firm of Keyes & Looney. He is also a practitioner in residence with the Criminal Justice Program in

the Department of Public Safety at the University of New Haven in West Haven and is an adjunct faculty member in the Political Science Department at Quinnipiac University in Hamden.

**Michael Leachman**

**Director of State Fiscal Research, Center on Budget and Policy Priorities**

Michael Leachman is Director of State Fiscal Research with the State Fiscal Policy division of the Center, which analyzes state tax and budget policy decisions and promotes sustainable policies that take into account the needs of families of all income levels.

Since joining the Center in 2009, Leachman has researched a range of state fiscal policy issues including funding for education, the intersection between taxes and economic growth, and the impact of federal aid.

Prior to joining the Center, he was a policy analyst for nine years at the Oregon Center for Public Policy (OCP), a member of the State Priorities Partnership. His work at OCP included research on corporate income taxes, reserve funds, spending limits, the Earned Income Tax Credit, food stamps, and TANF.

Earlier in his career, Leachman worked as a community organizer in Chicago and, during graduate school, conducted a range of research projects in collaboration with community organizations.

Leachman holds a Ph.D. in sociology from Loyola University Chicago.

**Kurt Wise**

**Senior Policy Analyst, Massachusetts Budget and Policy Center**

Kurt Wise is a Senior Policy Analyst at the Massachusetts Budget and Policy Center, focusing on state tax policy. He also is responsible for covering Law & Public Safety programs in the budget and in tracking changes in employment and household income.

Prior to joining MassBudget, Kurt worked at the Maine Center for Economic Policy as the State Fiscal Analyst. In Maine, Kurt focused on state tax policy and the ongoing revenue shortfalls in the state budget. Kurt also analyzed the economic impacts of state environmental and energy policy, issues surrounding health care coverage for health care workers, and workforce development issues.

Prior to his work in Maine, Kurt worked at the Massachusetts Taxpayers Foundation analyzing the state budget. Kurt holds a Master's degree in Public Policy Analysis from Duke University, and a B.A. in Anthropology from UMass, Amherst.