



## Chapter Spotlight: Connecticut SSN Expands Policy Engagement with Second Annual Conference

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For the second year in a row, the Connecticut SSN chapter has hosted its Moving Beyond Implications conference to strengthen relationships between scholars and state policymakers. [Last year's event](#) already produced tangible policy impacts, including state funding for student-designed air purifiers in classrooms.

This year's conference doubled in size and continued to attract key decisionmakers from the state legislature, Governor's office, and state agencies, reinforcing the Connecticut chapter's role as a trusted resource. To extend its impact, the chapter hopes to feature insights from the event in its [Scholar Reflections column](#) in the *Connecticut Mirror*. In this chapter spotlight, chapter co-leaders [Kerri Raissian](#) (University of Connecticut) and [Abigail Williamson](#) (Trinity College) discuss the conference's evolution and their vision for sustained policy engagement. The following conversation has been edited for length and clarity.

**This is year two of the annual Moving Beyond Implications conference. What made you want to run this event on an annual basis?**

**Kerri:** SSN really trains its members that policy conversations don't just happen one time. They are about repeated interactions and repeated relationships, and so Moving Beyond Implications is just a part of that. It's a kickoff to the conversations we have during the session, but it's just one piece of the puzzle. There are conversations following up and getting policymakers what they might need after that, and so on. The other reason that we decided to host this annually is that policy needs and questions can also change over time. The topics that we addressed in the inaugural session may not be pressing policy needs or conversations this session, and who knows what next session will bring.



*Kerri Raissian speaks at the Moving Beyond Implications conference*

**One year later, are there any specific developments that came out of the inaugural Moving Beyond Implications conference?**

**Kerri:** The most public success story is that one of the groups that presented on student-created and made-in-classroom air purifying units received millions in bond funding from the state of Connecticut. This project really kind of serves a dual purpose. It is a STEM project for students because they are making these air purifying units and getting hands-on experience with this science project. Then those air purifiers are going into classrooms and are quite effective at purifying air, and we know that that's causally related to educational outcomes, student health, teacher wellbeing, all the people that are in the room breathing the air. So it's a win-win. Connecticut has also bonded much larger efforts to get HVAC systems into schools, but that's a long process. So this is a good bridge measure and builds on curriculum and science and learning while also helping to achieve better air quality.

**Abigail:** This story is also exciting because we didn't solicit this specific proposal, it came to us organically. So I think that speaks to a mix of having the openness to new ideas that come over the transom and also planning some proposals that we know align with the priorities of policymakers.

**Kerri:** Exactly, we knew that air quality was a major interest of the education committee, but we didn't solicit that presentation. And so that's probably the biggest success, but there were also a lot of other stories. A lot of folks learned about SSN for the first time, both policymakers, practitioners. We had a lot of new members join

the chapter because to take part in the conference they had written a brief.

Moving Beyond Implications also enjoys participation from the executive branch. The Lieutenant Governor has now opened both conferences. The Governor's advisors, many commissioners, and folks that work on policy through implementation in a variety of departments also attend. So I think that's another success because it helps academics understand that there are multiple entry points to the policy process and most academics don't know how to access all of those points. At the same time, it also introduces all of those folks to academics who are interested in helping them or meeting their research needs.

### **How did your prior policy connections help you to organize this conference?**

**Abigail:** Before Moving Beyond, during Covid, Kerri had the idea to host a meet and greet with legislators over Zoom. There were three or four legislators there and we just sort of talked about what they were looking for from academics. An idea that came up was that a UConn center (InCHIP) in the past had held a conference where state agencies shared the data that they have and that researchers could easily pick up and use somehow. But that was no longer happening on a regular basis, so there was this need for it. InCHIP is now a wonderful partner and co-sponsor for Moving Beyond.

One of the nice things about working in Connecticut is that it's a small state. Kerri and I had personal connection to Rachel Leventhal-Weiner and Scott Gaul. Rachel is a sociologist who works as the Director of Evaluation and Impact and Scott is the Chief Data Officer, both at Connecticut's Office of Policy and Management. When I reached out to Rachel and Scott, they were very interested in this idea, so we held an initial event with them and some academics who have used state data who spoke about their experiences and it formed an evolving relationship. Rachel comes to most of our events now, and she and Scott kicked off the Moving Beyond conference.

**Kerri:** Relationships are everything. Like Abby said, Connecticut is a small state, and the public hearing rooms in our legislature are quite small. So if you want to meet representative, go to public hearings and you'll meet plenty of them, and at least in Connecticut they will see that as a real interest.

Moving Beyond came about because I testified at a public hearing, where I met Representative Jaime Foster, who also has a PhD from UConn. We immediately recognized each other as academic policy thinking people and we just kept in touch, even though she's not my representative. Later on, Representative Foster and I were on a InCHIP panel together and afterwards she sent me a text while I was folding laundry that basically said, "Do you want to do a conference with me?"

Representative Foster and her staff, especially Max DeLorenzo, really helped pull this all together for the both years, and this year we also had the help of Representative Dominique Johnson, and we each brought the people that we had relationships with. Our job was to bring the researchers and their job was to bring the legislators. So it's about knowing what your relationships are, knowing the relationships you don't have,

figuring out the person who can thoughtfully expand that network in a way that makes sense for them.

**Abigail:** And I think it's important to note that Representative Foster, Representative Johnson, and Rachel Leventhal-Weiner have PhDs. So looking for PhD or research engaged folks within policy making circles can be a good relationship building start.



*Rep. Jaime Foster (center) and fellow policymakers at Moving Beyond Implications*

**What did year two of the Moving Beyond Conference look like and what lessons have you learned along the way?**

**Kerri:** Year two was definitely bigger than the first. During the inaugural conference we had 12 presentations in the agenda and this year we had 24 presentations. The way we do the presentations now is it's grouped by subcommittees that have some relation to each other and we merge them. We had really high quality presentations and have had conversations about wanting a set of presentations totally geared towards one subcommittee in the future, and some folks are even asking for their own set of presentations. The timeline of the legislative session and the timeline of academics is often difficult to line up, but that's a challenge that we'll continue to think about so that we can continue to be in conversation with our policymakers in Connecticut.

**Abigail:** I think it's sometimes hard to predict which presentations are going to capture people's interests. Sometimes there's a very crisp, useful, insightful presentation but there isn't the right person in the room and that's where you hope the briefs afterwards will have that impact. But I can give a good example of one that

did hit just right this year.

Crossan Cooper, an economics PhD student from Yale, presented work that was very community engaged. He was using municipal and state data, and working with advocacy organizations, to talk about rental assistance programs in Connecticut. At an early stage of his career, he had done some really interesting work and housing is a huge issue in Connecticut that our policymakers are thinking about. There was a representative-elect in the room who had previously worked on a planning and zoning commission, and he came up during the Q&A and asked him a number of very applied questions and the scholar was really able to answer them and they had a very valuable dialogue. Afterwards they connected and continue the dialogue and the scholar was able to say: here's what we know, here's what we don't know, here's what we would need to know in order to find out the answers to the questions that you have. So that was a great example of both providing this representative-elect with some information that he had been lacking, giving him a broader view from his previous work on the municipal planning and zoning council, as well as forming a relationship that will make it likely that they will connect again in the future.



*Abigail Williamson presents at the Moving Beyond Implications conference*

### **What are your plans now that the conference has concluded?**

**Kerri:** One of the things we hope that will happen is that many of the folks that presented will take their presentation or their policy briefs and turn that into a Scholar Reflections column in the *Connecticut Mirror* that we host. We're also going to help the presenters with any follow up that they may want to do with legislators

who attended.

And then we'll start planning for the next Moving Beyond over the summer. When we put the call for proposals together, we often hear that people want more time, so we're hoping to get the ball rolling even earlier this year. We're also looking forward to working more with InCHIP at UConn, a co-sponsor of the conference, who have offered to help with some of the things expansion will bring. Basically one conference's conclusion is another one's beginning!