

Alumni Association presents 2025 awards to distinguished social workers

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From left to right: Dr. Allyson O'Connor, Michael Spencer, Dr. Susan Davies

Four Tulane School of Social Work alumni received awards at our Alumni Reception during Wave Weekend for doing work that matters. Please join us in celebrating their achievements.

The Do Work That Matters Recent Graduate Award



"Every form of work needs a social work lens." Kelly C. Sharkey, MSW, MPH

The Do Work that Matters Recent Graduate Award recognizes the contributions and achievements of an alumnus who graduated within the last 10 years. Recipients of this award hit the ground running – if not doing a marathon sprint – since they graduated from TSSW. They are individuals who have been movers and shakers as social workers, making their mark quickly in this field.

Kelly C. Sharkey is a 2018 Tulane graduate, holding both a Master of Social Work and a Master of Public Health. After graduating, Kelly served as a case manager working with individuals in permanent supportive housing programs, which provided her a deep understanding of the additional challenges that come with finding safe and secure housing for individuals in our communities. She also gained an early understanding of how policy impacts clients, a perspective that has stayed with her as her career has continued to evolve and as she continues her advocacy for change.

Now, as Director of Programs and Communications at the Humanities Foundation, Kelly leads major affordable housing initiatives across the Southeast. She manages rental and utility assistance programs serving thousands of low-income households, oversees trauma-informed resident services in senior and family housing communities, and directs external communications to support fundraising and advocacy. She also holds leadership roles on the City of Charleston's Commission on Homelessness and the Lowcountry Continuum of Care, demonstrating sustained

impact and engagement at the systems level.

She recently supported the redevelopment of the historic Henry P. Archer School in Charleston, which was transformed this space into affordable senior housing while also preserving the cultural and architectural significance of the space. Throughout this process, Kelly ensured the redevelopment was centered around the needs of the incoming residents while respecting the memories of the community and this historic space. This project is now featured as a national HUD case study.

As her nomination form stated, “Her work is not performative—it’s purposeful. It is informed by experience, shaped by education, and powered by a deep commitment to justice.”

Ellen Gates Starr Service Award



"The most important thing is to love on each other; to care for each other; to let each other know that we are going to get through this together. We know if our hearts what is right. All we have to do is do it." Patricia Morris, ACSW

The Starr Service Award recognizes the contributions and achievements of an alumnus who has worked with the spirit of one of our social service pioneers, Ellen

Gates Starr, in their careers as social workers. This award honors those TSSW graduates who have worked tirelessly in the field to better the lives of others, as an unsung hero, with little recognition and who share Miss Starr's unflagging spirit.

Patricia Morris is a 1971 Master of Social Work graduate. After earning her MSW, she began her career providing clinical services to vulnerable populations for 18 years as Associate Director of Green Door in Washington, DC.

She expanded her reach through leadership roles, including Director of Family Services for Prince George's County in Maryland for 6 years. While there, she developed policies to improve service delivery in Maryland's second-largest majority-Black county, ensuring more equitable access to critical services. In addition to her professional responsibilities, Patricia found much satisfaction both as a Field Instructor and Board Member for various non-profits.

Since retiring in 2012, Patricia has poured her heart into supporting family caregivers through the non-profit she founded, "Hands of Hope Caregivers Foundation (HOH)". She started this agency to share insights she had gained from a decade of caring for her own aging parents. As President and CEO, Patricia wears many hats. Her work ensures that caregivers' experiences directly shape public policy.

As her nominator concluded, "With over 40 years in social work, Patricia brings deep expertise, but what sets her apart is her compassion. She never seeks the spotlight, only better outcomes for others."

1914 Distinguished Alumni Award for Community Service



"When your community is impacted, you share what you have, and you give what you can." Ann Beck, LICSW

Tulane School of Social Work recognizes an alumnus whose achievements exemplify the values of TSSW and has consistently demonstrated exceptional contributions to community engagement and social work service.

Ann Beck is a 2005 graduate of Tulane School of Social Work's MSW program. Since graduating, her impact in the field of social work has been defined by leadership, creativity, and a steadfast commitment to community well-being.

Early in her career, she led efforts to house veterans experiencing homelessness through the Supported Services for Veterans Families program, helping to reduce veteran homelessness in her community by 58 percent between 2011 and 2013. When federal case managers were unavailable, she and her team stepped in to fill the gap, ensuring that no eligible veteran was left waiting for critical services. This initiative exemplifies her proactive, results-oriented approach and her dedication to doing what needs to be done rather than waiting for larger systems to catch up.

Today, she manages Community Health and Human Services programs for Whatcom County, Washington, overseeing a budget of more than forty million dollars, nearly thirty staff members, and ten major programs. Her division supports individuals and families experiencing homelessness, veterans in need, people with developmental disabilities, and new mothers. She leads with compassion and strategy, clearing

barriers for her team while navigating complex political environments. Her ability to build relationships across ideological divides has allowed her to move critical policy forward, including securing the support of previously resistant elected officials.

Beyond her professional role, she has also strengthened her community through philanthropy. In 2015, she co-founded 100+ Women of Whatcom, a collective giving group in which members pledge to donate one hundred dollars twice a year to local nonprofits selected by the group. Under her leadership, the initiative has grown from sixty to nearly two hundred members and has contributed approximately two hundred thousand dollars in unrestricted funding to twenty local organizations. These efforts have helped sustain vital services, including the local food bank's ability to maintain full operations during high-demand summer months.

Her work is distinguished by its combination of social work ethics and systems-level leadership. In an environment often dominated by technical and fiscal perspectives, she brings a human-centered lens that ensures equity, dignity, and sustainability remain at the forefront of public service. She models servant leadership through humility, collaboration, and humor, fostering a team culture where people support one another and remain committed to their mission.

1914 Distinguished Alumni Award for Academic/Research



"Neither of my parents graduated from high school, but they taught me things I could never learn in the classroom. My mother taught me to be adventurous and creative. My father gave me unbridled courage. More than research and curriculum, these are the qualities I bring to this work and foster in my students." Rebecca A. Chaisson, PhD, LCSW

Tulane School of Social Work recognizes an alumnus whose achievements exemplify the values of TSSW and has consistently demonstrated exceptional contributions to social work research, the social work profession, and who has had distinguished careers in social work as outstanding teachers, researchers, and mentors.

Dr. Rebecca A. Chaisson received both her MSW (1977) and her PhD in Social Work (1999) from Tulane School of Social Work. Currently the Dean of Southern University of New Orleans' Millie M. Charles School of Social Work, Dr. Chaisson has successfully mentored faculty, staff, and students to excel in their chosen fields of practice. At SUNO, she has also integrated online education with specialized programs and received several grants from the university's Breakfast of Champions Initiative.

She has published on a variety of topics, including racial injustice and incarceration. Most recently, she co-authored a chapter of the landmark book "Social Work, White Supremacy, and Racial Justice: Reckoning With Our History, Interrogating our Present, Reimagining our Future."

Prior to joining academia, Dr. Chaisson has a legacy of serving diverse populations, including families, children, incarcerated individuals, and groups struggling with mental health, physical health, and addiction. She has remained diligent in her efforts to serve others with integrity to address issues that affect individuals, families, and communities at micro, mezzo, and macro levels.

Additional Recognition: Dedicated Service and Commitment as Board President 2024-2025



Dr. Allyson Bodin O'Connor was recognized at the Fourth Annual Tulane School of Social Work Awards Gala for her dedication, service, and commitment to the school's alumni as the TSSW Alumni Association Board of Directors from January 2024 - December 2025. She previously served as the Board's Vice President from 2022-2023.

She is recognized for her achievements during her tenure as Board President. In this capacity, she oversaw the development of inaugural board policy to ensure consistency and equity in all member activities. She also spearheaded the redevelopment of a career engagement and mentorship committee that will engage with recent graduates of the school to support their professional development post TSSW graduation. Dr. O'Connor additionally strengthened the footprint of the board

with renewed relationships and partnerships with both the Tulane Office of Advancement as well as with the School of Social Work.

The Board has flourished under Dr. O'Connor's tenure and was proud to award her this recognition for her achievements.