



2025 Virginia Coordinated Clinical Research Summit

*Generating Impact Through
Research and Collaboration*

The Westin – Richmond

June 4, 2025



Virginia Coordinated
Clinical Research Network

FOREWORD

To a lay person, terms like “biotechnology” and “life sciences” may sound technical or unfamiliar. In fact, they are part of our lives in everything from food safety to clinical advancements, and industrial processes. On a global scale, the value of the biotech market was \$1.55 trillion in 2023, with growth expected at a compound annual rate of 13.96 percent from 2024 to 2030. The Virginia biotechnology sector is responsible for more than 1,400 life sciences companies. Overall, the sector contributes \$8 billion to the state economy and employs more than 26,500 people. Biotechnology propels the development of new medicines, cancer treatments, gene therapy, and advances in scientific understanding of serious conditions such as Alzheimer’s disease, among many other examples.

To further support that work, a coalition of health care systems, institutions of higher education, and other organizations have united to help launch the Virginia Coordinated Clinical Research Network (VCCRN). The VCCRN was established with an initial investment from the Virginia General Assembly. Its mission is to strengthen collaboration among clinical, academic, and biotechnology and life sciences organizations to accelerate clinical research and trials across the Commonwealth to address health disparities, improve outcomes, and support economic growth. The goal of the inaugural 2025 Virginia Coordinated Clinical Research Summit is to bring together stakeholders across sectors who are “Generating Impact Through Research and Collaboration.” We are excited to welcome you and hope that this event and the connections and learnings you gain here inspire you and your work going forward.



Amy Adams
Executive Director
GMU Institute for
Biohealth Innovation



Lara D'Antonio
Executive Director
VCCRN



AGENDA

Registration

Location: Conference Center Entrance

8–9 a.m.

Networking Breakfast

Location: Chesapeake Ballroom

8–9 a.m.

Introduction and Welcome

Speakers: Mayor Danny Avula, Lara D’Antonio
Location: Chesapeake Ballroom

9–9:15 a.m.

Keynote Remarks

*“Protecting America’s Medicine Cabinet:
A Journey Through Innovation, Collaboration,
and a Search for Significance”*

Speaker: Dr. Eric Edwards
Location: Chesapeake Ballroom

9:15–10:15 a.m.

Break

10:15–10:30 a.m.

Panel Discussion

*“Bridging Discovery and Delivery: Industry-Driven
Innovation in Virginia’s Clinical Research Ecosystem”*

Moderator: Jim Pannucci
Speakers: Grace Festa, Dr. Lauren Siff
Location: Chesapeake Ballroom

10:30–11:15 a.m.



AGENDA

Panel Discussion

"Data-Driven Discovery: Advancing Research Through Coordinated Analytics"

Moderator: Andre Tolleris

Speaker: Harsha K. Rajasimha

Location: Chesapeake Ballroom

11:15 a.m.-12 p.m.

Networking Lunch

Location: Chesapeake Ballroom

12-1:15 p.m.

Panel Discussion

"From Protocol to Breakthrough: Advancing Research Through Network Collaboration"

Moderator: Heather Richter

Speakers: Andrea Mohr, Susan Mitchell

Location: Chesapeake Ballroom

1:15-2 p.m.

Innovation Leadership Panel

"Virginia on the Frontier: Leadership Perspectives on the Future of Clinical Research"

Speakers: Sean T. Connaughton, John Newby

Location: Chesapeake Ballroom

2-2:50 p.m.

Closing Remarks

Speaker: Michael Elliott

Location: Chesapeake Ballroom

2:50-3 p.m.



SPEAKER



Dr. Danny Avula Mayor City of Richmond

Dr. Danny Avula took office as the 81st Mayor of the City of Richmond on January 1, 2025. Before being elected Richmond's first immigrant mayor, Dr. Avula served the Richmond and Henrico Health Districts for 12 years, including as the Director for six years. In that role, he championed efforts to address maternal and childhood health, access to reproductive care, community safety, and the root causes that shape health outcomes — especially poverty and race.

In January 2021, Virginia Governor Ralph Northam appointed Dr. Avula to lead Virginia's COVID-19 vaccination effort. He jump started a struggling vaccine rollout and elevated the Commonwealth from 50th place to one of the top 10 most-vaccinated states in the nation. After the pandemic started to recede, Virginia Governor Glenn Youngkin appointed Dr. Avula as Commissioner of the Virginia Department of Social Services in 2022, where he implemented key changes to support families and to create more sustainable pathways out of poverty. He also expanded resources through successful legislative advocacy, began the process of replacing outdated IT systems, and ensured employees statewide had the necessary training to offer responsive, high-quality service.

Dr. Avula is a pediatrician and works as a hospitalist at Chippenham Hospital. Born in Hyderabad, India, he immigrated to the United States with his parents in 1979. A father of five, Dr. Avula and his wife, Mary Kay, have lived in Richmond's East End for more than 20 years. Mary Kay is a teacher in Richmond Public Schools.

Dr. Avula holds degrees from the University of Virginia, VCU, and Johns Hopkins. He was named one of Richmond's "Top Docs" each year from 2013–2022, a Richmond Times-Dispatch Person of the Year in 2019, and Style Weekly's Richmonder of the Year in 2020. In 2017, he won the Dancing With the Richmond Stars contest.



SPEAKER



Sean T. Connaughton President and CEO VHHA

Sean T. Connaughton has served as VHHA President and CEO since 2014. Prior to joining VHHA, he served as Virginia's Transportation Secretary from 2010-2014 in the Cabinet of Governor Robert F. McDonnell.

Connaughton served in a Presidentially-appointed, U.S. Senate-confirmed position as Administrator of the United States Maritime Administration from 2006-2009, and was Corporate Vice President of Government Affairs for the American Bureau of Shipping. Connaughton's public service also extends to elected office – from 2000-2006, he was Chairman of the Prince William County Board of Supervisors, which is the chief elected position in Virginia's second largest county – and the armed forces.

Connaughton served as a commissioned officer on active duty with the United States Coast Guard, and later joined the United States Naval Reserve, retiring from that service with the rank of Commander. Connaughton is a licensed attorney admitted to practice in Virginia and the District of Columbia. He practiced law for 15 years with private firms and has appeared before the United States Supreme Court.

He has a Bachelor's degree from the United States Merchant Marine Academy, a Master's degree from Georgetown University, a law degree from George Mason University, and he graduated from the United States Naval War College. He also has been designated a Henry Toll Fellow by the Council of State Governments, a Virginia Institute of Political Leadership Fellow, and recently was named a Fellow by the Virginia Law Foundation.

He is married to Teresa and has two adult children: Courtney and Sean Jr.



SPEAKER



Lara D'Antonio
Director of Clinical
Research Navigation and
Executive Director
**VHHA Foundation and
Virginia Coordinated
Clinical Research Network**

Lara D'Antonio joined the VHHA Foundation in July 2022 and serves as the Director of Clinical Research Navigation, a role in which she coordinates clinical research collaboration opportunities between clinician investigators, academia, and research industry partners to foster development of the Virginia Coordinated Clinical Research Network (VCCRN), which she serves as Executive Director.

Prior to joining VHHA, D'Antonio was the Director of Value Based Care at Patient First. She also served in several roles in advocacy, program and grants management, and business development/stakeholder engagement with the Virginia Community Healthcare Association.

D'Antonio serves in a volunteer capacity as a member of the Board of Trustees at the Children's Museum of Richmond and sits on the School Advisory Board for Saint Mary's Catholic School.

She holds a degree in philosophy from Sweet Briar College and a Master's degree in healthcare delivery science from Eastern Virginia Medical School. D'Antonio lives in Goochland with her husband, Steven, and four young children: William, Kate, Scott, and Emma.



SPEAKER



Dr. Eric Edwards Co-Founder and CEO **Phlow Corp.**

Dr. Eric Edwards is co-founder and chief executive officer of Phlow Corp., a pioneering public benefit pharmaceutical corporation. As CEO, Dr. Edwards has assembled a world-class team committed to providing a solution to the broken essential medicines supply chain and over-reliance on foreign manufacturers for our nation's highest priority medicines.

Dr. Edwards was previously co-founder of Kaléo, Inc. a pharmaceutical company in Richmond, VA. During his 16 years at Kaléo, he held several executive management positions including Chief Science Officer, where he was responsible for overall scientific strategy and all pharmaceutical development programs; Chief Medical Officer responsible for developing a medical affairs team and capability while operationalizing the company's clinical program strategy; and Vice President – Innovation, overseeing Kaleo's research and development pipeline and overall new product strategy.

Dr. Edwards is the co-inventor of multiple marketed products, including AUVI-Q, epinephrine auto-injector for the treatment of allergic emergencies (anaphylaxis), is named on more than 215 issued and patent-pending applications, and is a published author on numerous scientific publications.

Dr. Edwards also continues to serve his community by volunteering on a local rescue squad, including responding to 911 calls and training paramedics in pre-hospital emergency care. He earned a BS in Biology, PhD in the Pharmaceutical Sciences, and Doctor of Medicine degrees at Virginia Commonwealth University/Medical College of Virginia.



SPEAKER



Michael I. Elliott Senior VP and COO **VCU Health System**

Michael I. Elliott is Senior Vice President and Chief Operating Officer at Virginia Commonwealth University Health System.

In this role, Elliott is responsible for integrating the academic health system's organizational strategic plan with its operations. Elliott leads efforts to deliver equitable, high-quality, cost-effective, and integrated care across the health system's hospitals and clinics.

Prior to Virginia Commonwealth University Health System, Elliott served as Senior Vice President and Chief Transformation Officer at Centra Health based in Lynchburg, VA.

Elliott earned Doctor of Pharmacy and Master of Science in Health Administration degrees at the Virginia Commonwealth University School of Pharmacy and School of Health Professions.

Elliott is a Fellow of the American College of Healthcare Executives, serves on the Board of Trustees of Sweet Briar College, serves on the American Hospital Association Community and Population Health Advisory Committee, is a past Chair of the Virginia Hospital & Healthcare Association's Board of Directors, is an elder at his church "The Hope Company", and is a proud member of Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity, Inc.

Elliott and his wife, Lashelle, have three children named Christian, Donovan and Evan.



SPEAKER



Grace Festa

Industry Director, Biopharmaceuticals Virginia Economic Development Partnership

Grace Festa is the director of biopharmaceuticals at the Virginia Economic Development Partnership (VEDP), Virginia's state-level economic development group. She is responsible for ecosystem development and lead generation within the life sciences sector across the Commonwealth.

With the mission to bring new jobs and investment to the Commonwealth of Virginia, Festa assists both domestic and international businesses with expansion projects, connecting them to state-level economic development incentives and services.

She also works with existing companies and stakeholders to care for the Virginia life science ecosystem. Over her 15-plus year economic development career, Festa has worked in a variety of roles, including business development, business attraction, business retention and expansion, export promotion, talent retention and attraction, and marketing and communications.

Festa is a Certified Economic Developer through the International Economic Development Council. She holds an MA degree in Urban and Regional Planning from Virginia Commonwealth University and BAs in Spanish and German from the University of Connecticut.



SPEAKER



Susan Mitchell, MEL Founder and CEO **Athari Biosciences**

With a strong passion for innovation, Susan Mitchell is eager to leverage her government contracting experiences to make meaningful contributions in the field and is known for protecting people, programs, and performance at the helm of Guardians of Honor.

After more than 20 years leading teams that support program evaluations, grants management, research, and workforce development efforts for agencies such as NSF, NIH, and NASA, Mitchell is deploying that body of knowledge to positively impact the biotech industry via her newest venture, Athari BioSciences, an independent CLIA certified BSL-2 diagnostic, research, and training laboratory. Driven by collaboration and a deep desire to advance wellness and workforce initiatives, Mitchell brings her expertise to the forefront with unwavering dedication. Her efforts sustain the integrity of operational and program objectives and drive improvement and access. Her passion is safeguarding economic structures and transformation by facilitating purposeful participation and creating capacity within the broader economic landscape at all levels.

Mitchell is an implementation scientist and translational researcher committed to delivering knowledge, skills, and abilities that solve the contemporary challenges of today while developing solutions for a brighter tomorrow. She graduated from Norfolk State University with a BS degree in Mass Communications, earned a Graduate Certificate in Legal Studies from Hampton University, and completed her Master's degree in Executive Leadership from Liberty University's Stern School of Business.



SPEAKER



Andrea Mohr, MHA, CCRP Director, Clinical Trials Office **Carilion Clinic**

Andrea Mohr is a seasoned clinical research leader with more than 15 years of experience advancing clinical trial operations across academic and community health care settings. As Director of the Clinical Trials Office at Carilion Clinic, she oversees a multidisciplinary team of 30-plus professionals managing trial coordination, regulatory affairs, financial operations, and systems infrastructure. Under her leadership, the organization has doubled its active clinical trials, achieved financial sustainability for its trial portfolio, and expanded research access across key specialties including oncology and cardiovascular medicine.

A Certified Clinical Research Professional (CCRP), Mohr holds a master's degree in health care administration from Radford University Carilion and a bachelor's degree in psychology from the College of William & Mary. She is an active member of several institutional and regional committees focused on research oversight, workforce development, and equitable trial access.

In her free time, Mohr enjoys completing DIY projects on her 100-year-old house and spending time with her husband, Will, and two young sons: Reeves and Elliott.



SPEAKER



John Newby
CEO
Virginia Bio

John Newby is the CEO at Virginia Bio, the statewide non-profit trade association for the life science industry. Approximately 300 companies spanning biopharmaceuticals, medical device, med tech, diagnostics, digital health, bioinformatics, agriculture and industrial bio and related fields are based in Virginia, mainly clustered around research universities and medical

institutions. Virginia Bio is the sole state affiliate and works closely with key national industry organizations: BIO, AdvaMed, MDMA, PhRMA, and We Work for Health.

Newby was formerly the Commissioner of the Virginia Department of Veterans Services (VDVS), where he led an 850-member agency located across 50 Virginia locations, delivering employment, education, benefits, behavioral health, and long term health care services to Virginia's Reservists, Guardsmen, transitioning service members, and 725,000 veterans.

Prior to leading VDVS, Newby practiced corporate, intellectual property, and Hatch-Waxman biopharmaceutical law at international law firms in Richmond and Washington, D.C., and at a multinational company. Newby previously commanded an Air Force special operations unit supporting the U.S. Army's 3rd and 7th Special Forces Groups (Airborne), and served in Iraq as an aviator aboard the Boeing B-1B Lancer strategic bomber. Newby earned a BS from the United States Air Force Academy, with Military Distinction, and his JD from the University of Virginia School of Law.



SPEAKER



Jim Pannucci, PhD VP, Entrepreneurship and Ecosystem Development **Activation Capital**

Dr. Jim Pannucci is the Vice President for Entrepreneurship for Activation Capital in Richmond, VA.

He works to form and support new BioHealth companies in the region and provide new founders with business coaching and strategic direction, as well as access to investors and other key opinion leaders.

Activation Capital is growing the BioHealth hub in Richmond and seeks to make it easy for companies to succeed. Pannucci's career in science has spanned the diverse business cultures of the pharmaceutical industry, national laboratories, federally funded research and development centers, and contract services for research and program management.

Like many scientists, his time at the bench evolved into leadership roles where he is responsible for strategy, business and pipeline development, profit-and-loss management, and R&D operations. The technical spectrum of this work includes basic and applied research, GMP/GLP product development, technology review and investment decisions, team formation and leadership, as well as the fundamentals of running a science business.



SPEAKER



Harsha K. Rajasimha, PhD **Founder and CEO** **Jeeva Clinical Trials**

Dr. Harsha Rajasimha is a globally recognized authority on AI-enabled, patient-centric clinical trials and the visionary Founder and CEO of Jeeva Clinical Trials, an award-winning SaaS platform that accelerates decentralized and hybrid studies across oncology, rare diseases, dermatology, obesity, and other high-impact therapeutic areas.

With more than two decades of experience spanning the NIH, FDA, and biopharmaceutical research and development, Dr. Rajasimha blends deep expertise in genomics, precision medicine, and digital health with a passion for eliminating barriers to patient participation. Under his leadership, Jeeva's Unified-or-Modular CTMS harnesses advanced artificial intelligence, real-world data, and multilingual clinical research workflows to cut trial timelines by up to 38 percent, reduce site burden by 60 percent, and improve retention among medically underserved populations worldwide.

A serial entrepreneur and rare-disease advocate, Dr. Rajasimha chairs the Indo-US Bridging RARE Summit and advises international patient-advocacy organizations on health equity in research. Honored with the Virginia Innovator of the Year Award, SBIR grants, and recognition from the AWS Healthcare Competency program, Dr. Rajasimha continues to champion data-driven innovation that democratizes access to life-saving treatments. He holds a PhD in Bioinformatics and Genomics from Virginia Tech, has authored more than 40 scientific publications, and is an invited keynote speaker at the Outsourcing Clinical Trials conference, World Orphan Drug Congress, National Minority Quality Forum, RARE Advocacy Summit, Bio-IT World, and speaks at events organized around BIO and JP Morgan Healthcare conferences.



SPEAKER



Heather Richter, PhD Executive Director **Hampton Roads Biomedical Research Consortium**

Heather Richter serves as the HRBRC's Executive Director. Prior to her current role, Heather directed the HRBRC's multi-institutional Digital Neighborhoods research platform.

She is an expert in applying computational and geospatial technologies to study the spatial and temporal relationships between determinants of health and patterns of chronic and infectious disease outcomes.

Richter has held associate faculty appointments at Tulane, West Virginia University, and the University of Oklahoma. She currently volunteers as one of the founding board members for the Cancer Pain Research Consortium, as a panel reviewer for NIH, and works as a scientific consultant.

She has been successfully funded by NIH through R21 and clinical and translational science awards, and, as a veteran of large-scale scientific initiatives, has extensive experience in research design, scientific planning, and administration. Dr. Richter received her PhD, MS, and BS from the University of Oklahoma.



SPEAKER



Dr. Lauren Siff

**Chief of Gynecology, Urogynecology
Central Virginia VA Health
Care System**

Dr. Siff is a double board-certified urogynecologist who serves as Chief of Gynecology and Chief of Urogynecology for the Central Virginia VA Health Care System as well as Associate Professor for the VCU School of Medicine and VCU Institute of Engineering.

Dr. Siff has dedicated her career to innovation and surgical education, completing a certificate of Distinguished Educator at the Cleveland Clinic, publishing an augmented reality curriculum for transvaginal surgery, and founding SurgicalEd VR, a surgical training platform aimed at improving the quality, safety, cost effectiveness and access to training, using haptic technology and virtual reality to prevent the need for practicing on patients.

Dr. Siff has served as a Board Member or Committee Chair for multiple national societies (Society for Gynecologic Surgeons, American Urogynecologic Society, American Association of GYN Laparoscopists). She currently serves as Central Virginia Site Lead for the National VA Women's Health Research Network, Regional GYN Community of Practice Lead Consultant, and sits on the U.S. National Surgery Office's Surgical Advisory Board for OBGYN. Dr. Siff has authored many peer-reviewed publications and award-winning oral presentations and is honored to have received several awards for peer-review, clinical excellence, bedside manner, teaching, teamwork, and compassion.

Philanthropically, she serves on the Advisory Board as Director for Surgeon Training for Global Surgical Expedition. Dr. Siff has a strong mission of democratizing access to surgical training and therefore increasing the access to vital surgical procedures in all areas of the world.



SPEAKER



Andre Tolleris Director of Data Analytics VHHA

Andre Tolleris is the Director of Data Analytics at VHHA, with more than seven years of experience in health care analytics roles. Since joining the association in 2022, he's led significant enhancements to the association's analytics platform: VHHA Analytics. Tolleris is certified in Tableau (Tableau Certified Data Analyst) and has overhauled dashboards to improve user experience and visual appeal

while developing entirely new tools to empower data-driven decision-making.

He manages VHHA's data warehouse, overseeing inpatient and emergency department patient-level data, and serves as a subject matter expert on billed encounters data from hospitals. In this role, Tolleris supports advocacy efforts by training teams and delivering critical clinical and demographic insights to advance legislative and policy initiatives.

Beyond analytics platform development, he is intricately involved in numerous clinical quality improvement initiatives, including the Virginia Healthcare-Associated Infections Advisory Group (VHAG) and the VHHA Workplace Violence and Safety Task Force. Tolleris also provide strategic data support for grant-funded projects, such as VDH Chronic Disease initiatives, developing dashboards and enhancements that amplify program effectiveness.

He is currently pursuing a Master of Health Administration (MHA) degree at Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU) to further enhance his leadership in health care analytics. Outside of work, Tolleris enjoys traveling, weightlifting, and spending time with friends and family.



NOTES





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