



ILLINOIS STATE ALLIANCE OF YMCAS



RCXsports

WELCOME TO THE 2026 FALL STAFF RALLY!



Dear YMCA Colleagues,

It is both an honor and a privilege to welcome you as we gather to celebrate, learn, connect, and grow together. This year's Rally is especially meaningful as we commemorate the YMCA's 175th anniversary—a remarkable milestone that reflects nearly two centuries of strengthening communities, inspiring individuals, and building a healthy spirit, mind, and body for all.

Our 2026 theme, "THE It Starts Here PLACE," is a celebration of the people who bring the YMCA mission to life every day. While the Y's story began 175 years ago, its future is written by passionate, dedicated, and innovative staff members like you. YOU are the reason the YMCA remains a place unlike any other—a place where connections are formed, lives are changed, and communities are strengthened.

The YMCA's 175th Anniversary campaign reminds us that there truly is "No Place Like This Place." Across Illinois and around the world, the Y continues to evolve, innovate, and respond to the needs of our communities while remaining rooted in our shared mission and values. The old saying, "If you've seen one Y, you've seen one Y" still holds true today. Whether you have served at the Y for decades or are attending your first Rally, you are an important part of this legacy.

I encourage you to take full advantage of every opportunity this event offers. Connect with colleagues from across the state. Share your experiences and your Y story. Learn from one another. Explore new ideas and innovative approaches that will help us better serve our communities. Most importantly, celebrate the incredible impact that each of you makes every day.

Fall Staff Rally is more than an event—it is a reminder that our greatest strength lies in our people. Together, we honor the generations who built this movement before us while creating the foundation for those who will follow. The work we do matters, and the future of the YMCA continues to start with each of us.

Thank you for your commitment to the YMCA and for the passion, creativity, and dedication you bring to our mission. I am grateful to serve alongside you and excited for all that we will learn, share, and accomplish together. Together, let's celebrate our legacy, inspire one another, and continue proving that THE It Starts Here PLACE is the YMCA.

Warmly,
Erin Abercrombie
2026 Illinois YMCA Fall Staff Rally Chair
District Vice President, Gateway Region YMCA

FALL STAFF RALLY PLANNING COMMITTEE

Erin Abercrombie, Chair

District Vice President
Gateway Region YMCA

Alyssa Ann Anderson

Director, Larkin's Place
Stephens Family YMCA

Bre Barron

Membership & HR Director
Streator Family YMCA

Wendy Bonilla

Director of Alliance Services
Illinois State Alliance of YMCAs

Missy Contri

Aquatics Director
North Suburban YMCA

Tori Dutkiewicz

Before & After Care Director
Greater Joliet Area YMCA

Eddie Edwards

Wellness Director
Stephens Family YMCA

Natasha Howard

Executive Director
Edwardsville YMCA

Jamie Kucera

Executive Director/CEO
Pav YMCA

Alie Morgan

District Aquatics Director
Gateway Region YMCA

Mgcini Mpofu

Branch Executive
Two Rivers YMCA

Julie Murphy

District Sports Director
Gateway Region YMCA

Manar Nuaimi

Chief Engineer
YMCA of Metropolitan Chicago

Mike Ortiz

Marketing Manager
North Suburban YMCA

Francisco Saravia

IT Director
YMCA of Springfield

Megan Strama

Marketing Director
Pav YMCA

Paige Thompson

Director, Youth Development
Bloomington-Normal YMCA

Andy Thornton

CEO
Illinois State Alliance of YMCAs

Amanda Walker

Member Experience Director
Two Rivers YMCA



PAST COMMITTEE CHAIRS

(still working in the state)

Jamie Kucera – 2025

Patrick Manieri – 2024

Chris Weittenhiller – 2020

Rob Wilkinson – 2019

Sam Brooks – 2016

Andy Thornton – 2012

OUR PARTNERS

Please join us in thanking our sponsors and vendors for their continued support and generosity. Be sure to stop by our vendor booths during the Rally to learn more about these fantastic companies.

Vendor contact information can be found on page 10.

PRESENTING SPONSOR

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PARTNERS



FALL STAFF RALLY SCHEDULE

THURSDAY, SEPTEMBER 24

10:00 am - 5:00 pm Daxko Training Event

FRIDAY, SEPTEMBER 25

8:30 am - 9:30 am	Registration & Continental Breakfast
9:00 am - 10:00 am	Workshops Round I
10:15 am - 11:15 am	Workshops Round II
11:30 am - 1:30 pm	Lunch Program
1:45 pm - 3:00 pm	Peer Community Discussions
3:15 pm - 4:30 pm	General Session
4:30 pm	Closing

DAXKO PRE-CONFERENCE TRAINING EVENT

Thursday, September 24

10:00 am - 5:00 pm

Bloomington-Normal Marriott
201 Broadway Ave,
Normal, IL 61761

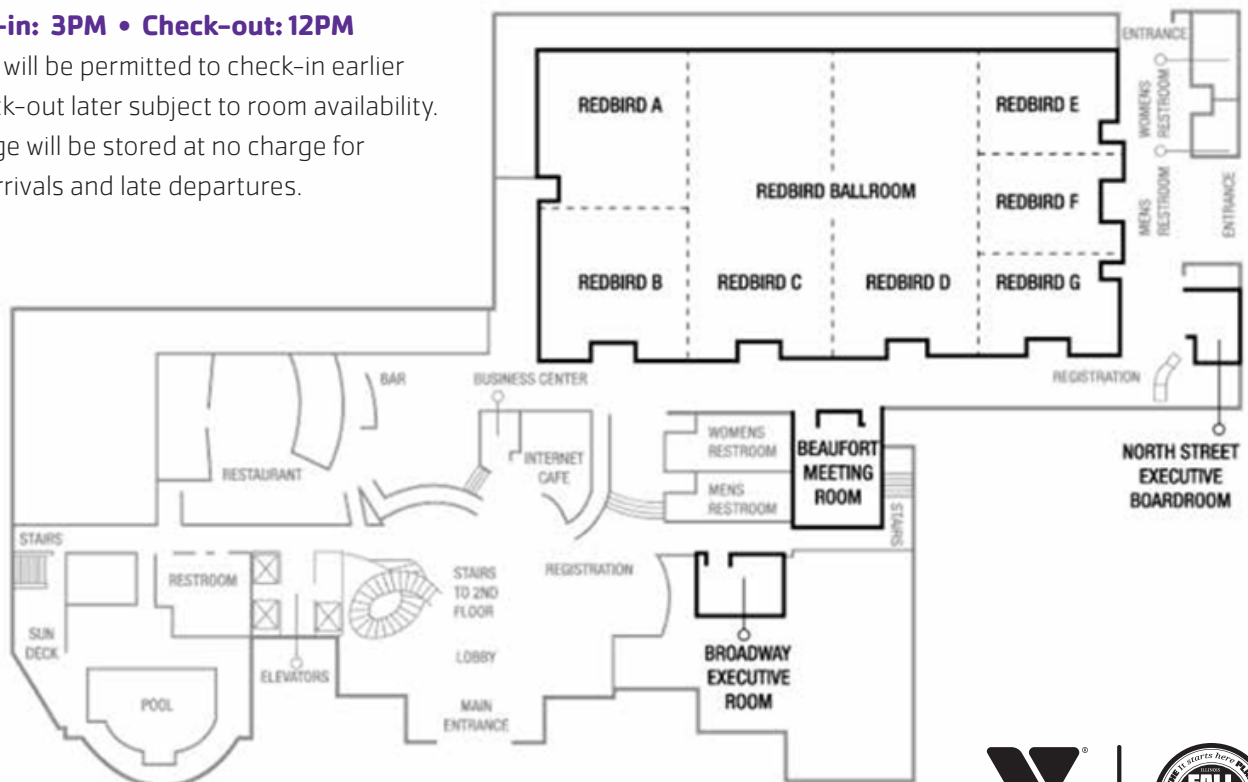
No cost to attend for up to two
people per association.

[CLICK HERE TO REGISTER](#)

BLOOMINGTON-NORMAL MARRIOTT HOTEL & CONFERENCE CENTER

Check-in: 3PM • Check-out: 12PM

Guests will be permitted to check-in earlier
or check-out later subject to room availability.
Baggage will be stored at no charge for
early arrivals and late departures.



GENERAL SESSIONS



Activating Leading Practices: How Rigorous Execution Drives Excellence

Alison Huppert, Director, Strategy & Quality Practices – Innovation, YMCA of the USA
Karen Friedman, Director, Strategy & Quality Practices – Mental Health, YMCA of the USA



YMCA Leading Practices are tested, proven ways of working designed to help Ys strengthen quality, consistency, and long-term sustainability. But Leading Practices do not create excellence on their own. They must be activated with rigor: the discipline, consistency, accountability, and measurement needed to make the work stick. In this interactive session, participants will explore what YMCA Leading Practices are, why they matter, and how operational rigor creates the stability teams need to execute well, improve over time, and stay agile in a changing environment.



People-First Leadership: The New Playbook

Nick Reich, Abundant Empowerment

Most organizations say people matter. Almost none have a system that proves it. This keynote gives leaders the six plays that build high-performing teams and high-performing cultures.

You'll leave with:

A new scorecard. Return on Humanity — the leadership question ROI was never built to ask.

Plays, not platitudes. A people-first framework they can run Monday, not just nod along to.

Answers to the One Big Question: If we know what good leadership looks like, why do our people experience bad leadership 3x more than great leadership?

PAST KEYNOTES



We've experienced a wide variety of keynote addressers over the years, from comedians and magicians to Suzanne McCormick (CEO of YUSA) and Jarrett Payton (former NFL player and son of football legend Walter Payton).

Who was your favorite?

WORKSHOPS

Adaptive Spaces & Resilient Faces:

Adapting Child Care for Social-Emotional Growth

**Tori Dutkiewicz, Before & After Care Director
Greater Joliet Area YMCA**

Children thrive when their environments adapt to not just their physical needs, but also their emotional needs, not the other way around. In this dynamic session, Adaptive Spaces & Resilient Faces, we will explore how flexible child care programming can become a powerful tool for social-emotional growth. Discover how subtle, intentional changes to your space, schedule, and interactions can de-escalate challenging behaviors, build self-regulation, and help every child develop the resilience they need to flourish.

Caring for Ourselves While Caring for Others:

Strengthening Staff Wellbeing to Strengthen Communities

**Karen Friedman, Director, Strategy & Quality Practices –
Mental Health, YMCA of the USA**

Y staff show up every day to create connection, safety, and belonging in their communities, but who is supporting you? This interactive session explores the essential role that caring for ourselves plays in Mental Health Community Care. Grounded in the YMCA's approach to mental health, participants will build a shared understanding of what it means to care for ourselves, not as an extra, but as a foundation for sustainable impact. This session is designed to help Y staff identify simple, realistic ways to integrate caring practices into their daily work and workplace culture so we can care for ourselves and each other while continuing to show up for our communities.

Evaluating Your Programs

**Jeff Cornelius, Chief Operating Officer &
Leslee Schueneman, Chief Financial Officer
Two Rivers YMCA**

During this session we will talk about the WHY of performing a Cost Study as well as work through the steps to take to create a useful tool to help analyze your program's financial health.

Exploring GLP-1s: Food, Fitness, & Finding the Balance

**Nicolette Hursey, Director of Wellness
Bloomington Normal YMCA**

This educational presentation will help participants better understand the growing conversation around GLP-1 medications and their role in health and wellness. This session will explore the potential benefits and side effects considerations of GLP-1s

while emphasizing the importance of balanced nutrition, regular physical activity, and sustainable lifestyle habits. Attendees will learn how food, movement, sleep, and mindset all work together to support overall well-being—whether using GLP-1 medications or not. This presentation encourages informed decision-making, realistic expectations, and a balanced approach to lifelong health.

From First Hello to Lasting Impact:

Recruiting, Onboarding, & Retention

**Janelle Reed, Director of Human Resources, SHRM-CP, CPG
Decatur Family YMCA**

Hiring great people is only step one, keeping them engaged, connected, and excited to stay is where the real work (and impact) happens. In this session, we'll take a fresh look at the full employee journey, from how we attract mission-driven candidates, to how we welcome them in those critical first days, to what truly keeps great staff coming back year after year. Spoiler: it's not just pay or perks its purpose, people, and experience. You'll walk away with real-world strategies you can use right away to strengthen your recruiting efforts, create onboarding experiences that make new hires feel like they belong from day one, and build a culture that people don't want to leave. Whether you're struggling with turnover or just want to level up your team experience, this session will give you ideas, tools, and a few "why didn't we think of that sooner?" moments along the way.

From Scan to Strategy: Using Body Composition to Strengthen Member Engagement

Zachary Boutelle, InBody

This interactive workshop helps YMCA leaders and staff move beyond simply offering InBody tests and begin using body composition data as part of a complete member engagement strategy. Participants will learn how to identify the story within an InBody Result Sheet, connect results to meaningful member conversations, recommend relevant programs, and create consistent follow-up opportunities.

Through group discussion, result sheet activities, and practical planning, participants will begin building a repeatable member journey that uses testing, staff interaction, programming, and progress tracking to support stronger outcomes, increased engagement, and long-term retention.

FALL STAFF RALLY SCHEDULE

Finding and Winning Grants

**Janay Sharp, Association Director of Grants and Foundations
Gateway Region YMCA**

Sharing practical grant development tips and strategies that other YMCA professionals can immediately put into practice.

Leadership vs. Management: Which do I use and when?

**Brad Ruehrdanz, Chief Executive Officer
Greater Peoria Family YMCA**

No matter where you are positioned in service to the YMCA, having an understanding of the differences and similarities between leadership and management can prove positive for effective relationship building and organizational growth. This session will breakdown the aspects of both leadership and management, challenge you to consider your approach and actions related to both, and provide tools to support your personal strategies for positive outcomes.

Re-imagining the YMCA: Transforming an Abandoned Office Building into a Community Asset

Jay Johnson, AIA and Ted Haug, AIA, Legat Architects

Can an abandoned office building become a vibrant YMCA that strengthens an entire community? Join this session to explore how the Northwest Illinois YMCA in Freeport, Illinois, is transforming a former insurance office building into a welcoming center for wellness, recreation, and community connection. Presenters will share the opportunities and challenges of adaptive reuse, including evaluating an existing building, integrating YMCA programs, improving visibility and accessibility, managing project costs, and creating flexible spaces that can evolve with future community needs.

The Storytelling of Marketing and Fundraising

**Jennifer Newell, Director of Marketing
Stephens Family YMCA**

Every interaction is an opportunity to tell the YMCA story. In this workshop, we'll explore how powerful storytelling can strengthen both fundraising and membership by connecting people to the Y's mission and impact. Learn how to share meaningful stories, communicate the value of membership beyond the facility, and inspire donors, members, and community partners to invest in our cause. Participants will leave with practical storytelling techniques they can use in conversations and everyday member interactions to help grow both engagement and support for the YMCA.

When Accountability Backfires:

**Leading Through Stress, Not Against It
Jen Frey, Executive Director, Buehler YMCA,
YMCA of Metropolitan Chicago
Kris Salyards, Executive Director,
The Bridge Youth and Family Mental Health**

Most leadership development programs focus on essential skills like communication, delegation, and accountability. Yet even well-trained leaders often encounter moments where these tools stop working—especially under pressure. Requests go unmet, expectations escalate, and performance declines despite increased effort.

This workshop addresses the hidden dynamic behind those moments: the human stress response. When leaders apply traditional accountability pressure to individuals already in a stress state, it can unintentionally trigger shutdown, avoidance, or disengagement. What appears to be resistance or lack of motivation is often a neurobiological response to perceived threat.

Participants will learn how to recognize these patterns in real time and adjust their approach to restore clarity, ownership, and performance.

By the end of this workshop, participants will be able to:

- Identify behavioral signs of stress responses in team members
- Distinguish between performance issues and stress-driven reactions
- Respond effectively in high-pressure moments without escalating disengagement

You're Still the Expert: AI as a Tool for YMCA Professionals

**Megan Larson, Grant Specialist
YMCA of Rock River Valley**

AI is ubiquitous, but what does it truly mean for your daily work at the Y? This session cuts through the noise and provides practical insights. We'll delve into how AI tools can enhance program communications, membership analysis, fundraising, and youth programming. Your expertise is invaluable, and AI merely empowers you to leverage it more effectively. We'll also engage in an honest discussion about responsible AI use, addressing key concerns such as bias, privacy, and the ethical considerations that are paramount for organizations serving youth and vulnerable populations. By the end of the session, you'll have practical prompts to apply immediately and a comprehensive ethical use checklist to share with your branch. No technical background is required!

FALL STAFF RALLY AWARDS



FIRST STAFF AWARD

Joseph Roknich
Award for
Outstanding
Fitness Director
presented to
Bill Bartley in 1954
(per Alliance records)

These awards were established to recognize outstanding performance by Illinois YMCA staff. Past award recipients have exemplified exceptional levels of work performance and displayed high regard for the YMCA's mission and work in their communities. Nominations are accepted annually, and recipients are chosen by members of the Fall Staff Rally planning committee.

EMERGING LEADER AWARD

This award is given to an individual in the YMCA whose contributions over their short time have made a difference in their community. This person exhibits a hunger for professional growth and has shown the ability to successfully lead their department or staff team. To qualify, nominees must have been on the job for more than six months and less than two years of continuous employment.

PROGRAM EXCELLENCE AWARD

The nominee must have shown the highest level of leadership in strengthening existing programs or in creating new programs as evidenced by his or her measurable achievements during the last year. This person demonstrates a commitment to advancing the mission of the YMCA in the community they serve. To qualify, nominees must have been on the job more than two years.

PROFESSIONAL ACHIEVEMENT AWARD

This award recognizes a YMCA staff person who has achieved notable professional growth or excellence in the past year. Consider staff in administrative roles such as business, membership, marketing, property management, financial development, human resources, technology or leadership; as well as those in programs who have made notable growth and achievement professionally. The nominee must have shown the highest level of leadership in their field as evidenced by measurable achievements.

LEADERSHIP LEGACY AWARD (formerly Illini Chief Award)

The Leadership Legacy Award recognizes a current Chief Executive Officer that provides extraordinary leadership to a corporate YMCA in Illinois by exemplifying the YMCA's values and mission. This award recognizes cause-driven leaders in their association, community, and the Y movement and among his or her peers across the State. This award is chosen by the Alliance CEO and a panel of past award winners.

2026 CHANGES TO AWARD CATEGORIES

Award categories were redesigned in 2026 in an effort to provide a more competitive process and to create a more meaningful experience for award recipients at Fall Staff Rally. Past award winners in historical categories can be found on the [Alliance website](#).

VENDOR CONTACTS

DAXKO

Membership Management Software
Jeff Moran
jeff.moran@daxko.com
205-260-5153
www.daxko.com

InBody

Body Composition Assessment Tools
Zachary Boutelle
zachary.boutelle@inbody.com
562-356-9006
www.inbodyusa.com

Landmark Aquatics

Swimming Pool Equipment, Renovation & Construction
Clint Anglin
canglin@landmarkaquatic.com
765-230-3981
www.landmarkaquatic.com

Legat Architects

Architecture Services
Jay Johnson
jjohnson@legat.com
847-846-0038
www.legat.com

Green Leaf Procurement

Staff Apparel, Uniforms, Promotional Products
Matt Jones
operations@greenleafprocurement.com
636-262-2280

LifeFitness

Ryan Matuszewski
Ryan.Matuszewski@lifefitness.com
815-735-7310
www.lifefitness.com

Matrix

Fitness Equipment
Kevin Kingston
kevin.kingston@matrixfitness.com
773-919-7370
www.matrix.com

RCX Sports

Youth Sports Programming
Cam Haslam
chaslam@RCXSports.com
www.rcxsports.com

YShop.biz/Sports Awards

YMCA Branded Promotional & Programming Products
Casey Fitzner
casey.fit@sportsawards.biz
773-852-2387
www.yshop.biz

Zurn Elkay Water Solutions

Filtered Drinking Water, Total Restroom Solutions
Zach Dufala
zachary.dufala@zurn.com
814-572-1576
www.zurnelkay.com

Northern Midwest Learning Center

Alex Gugala, Regional Training Director
agugala@duluthymca.org
218.722.4745 ext. 112

Y Retirement Fund

Retirement Planning
Matthew Servedio
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