



CHOICE. CLARITY. CONNECTION.

APRIL 12-16, 2026

SUNSEEKER RESORT • CHARLOTTE HARBOR, FL



PROGRAM DESCRIPTION:

The 2026 **NICU Leadership Forum** invites nurse leaders to explore the power of **Choice, Clarity, and Connection** in shaping healthy, high-performing teams. This year's theme focuses on empowering leaders to make intentional choices that foster balance, resilience, and professional fulfillment. Through inspiring keynotes, interactive sessions, and peer networking, participants will gain tools to support self-care and well-being during times of high stress. Join us to strengthen your leadership clarity, promote accountability, and deepen the connections that sustain excellence in neonatal care.

What to Expect at the 2026 NICU Leadership Forum:

Throughout this year's forum, participants will:

- Apply practical leadership strategies to cultivate balance, resilience, and psychological safety within your teams
- Strengthen decision-making clarity by learning frameworks that help prioritize resources, boundaries, and team needs
- Implement accountability practices that promote shared responsibility, transparency, and sustainable performance
- Build deeper professional connections through peer collaboration, guided discussions, and community-driven learning

KEYNOTE SPEAKERS



Mimi Brown

CSP

Amp Up Success

Boundaries, Bravery & the Beat of Leadership

When the work is heavy and the pace won't let up, leaders don't need another "be resilient" speech – they need a reset. In this music-infused, high-energy keynote, Mimi Brown, CSP helps perinatal and NICU leaders protect their energy, lead with purpose, and reignite their teams – without burning out.

Drawing from her new book *Amp Up Your Influence* (confidence, connection, and courage for women who lead) and her 20-year DJ background, Mimi blends stories, humor, and actionable moves that honor the realities of women's and neonatal care: moral distress, staffing constraints, and constant change.

Leaders will learn how to:

- Set brave boundaries that protect capacity and model healthy leadership
- Choose their tempo – focusing on what's in their control and what to release
- Create clarity for teams with simple, repeatable cues that steady the shift
- Rebuild connection through small, consistent moments that boost engagement and meaning



Sasha Shillcutt

MD, MS, FASE

Founder of Brave Enough +
Legacy Collective

Thriving Through Change: Choosing Joy in Times of Uncertainty

In this keynote, Dr. Shillcutt will share how to pivot with confidence and thrive amidst workplace change and the ever-evolving landscape of healthcare. In this energizing session, she will unpack the mindset shifts and practical actions that help leaders navigate uncertainty, advocate for their own well-being, and sustain purpose in challenging seasons. Attendees will leave equipped with clear, actionable strategies to set healthy boundaries, focus on what they can control, and embrace change as a catalyst for growth and leadership impact.



GENERAL SESSION SPEAKERS



Intentional Leadership: Making Moves That Matter

Megan Gillespie, DNP, MBA, RN, FACHE, Chief Executive Officer, Sutter Medical Center, Sacramento

In this engaging and practical session, a nurse leader turned system-wide CEO shares personal stories and hard-won lessons from a career spanning diverse roles and organizations. Attendees will explore the pivotal moments that define leadership transitions; whether it's moving up within a system, moving on to a new opportunity, or moving out to forge a different path.

Through candid insights and actionable strategies, this session offers guidance on recognizing when it's time to make a move, preparing for high-stakes interviews, navigating recruitment with intention and onboarding successfully into new leadership roles. Leaders will leave inspired and equipped to make strategic, values-driven decisions that support their growth, impact, and long-term fulfillment.



"How Should I Say This?" Communication Strategies for Important Conversations

Tessa Brock, MA, LPC, IMH-E, CEO, Founder, Tessa Brock

Approaching challenging conversations with patients, co-workers and professionals can be difficult yet is incredibly important! In this lighthearted and insightful presentation, participants will be able to self-reflect on their personal intentions for conversations and styles of holding "emotionally charged" or "high stakes" conversations. Participants will use real life scenarios to gain new ideas and skills for holding scenarios to gain new ideas and skills for holding conversations with more successful outcomes.



Riding the AI Wave as a Leader

James Barry, MD, MBA, Professor of Pediatrics, President of NeoMINDAI

The presentation will focus on the fundamentals of artificial intelligence, some of the significant issues that leaders need to consider, and how clinical leaders can leverage artificial intelligence in their daily and team-based work. Artificial intelligence in healthcare is evolving fast, which requires its leaders to become AI literate and role model as leaders applying and evaluating AI in their clinical arenas.



Back to Basics: Expanding the Nursing Voice for Impact

Joan Halpern, DNP, RNC-NIC, NNP, NEA-BC, Vice President and Chief Nursing Officer, NewYork-Presbyterian Weill Cornell

Discover how innovative governance redesign can transform organizational culture, elevate engagement, and deliver outcomes that exceed national benchmarks. In this session, Dr. Joan Halpern, Chief Nursing Officer at NewYork-Presbyterian/Weill Cornell, shares proven strategies for creating high-accountability, high-recognition environments that empower teams and advance patient care. Learn practical approaches to professional development, leadership influence, and building structures that sustain excellence and growth.

PRE-CONFERENCES

The AAP Neonatal Excellence Program: From Start to Finish (Half Day, AM)

Taking learnings from the NICU Verification Program, the pre-conference will focus on:

- How to fill out the PRQ.
- What are the neonatal quality standards people need to be aware of and preparing for?
- What are differentiators for level 3 and level 4 NICU?
- What does it take to prepare for nursing and what to expect during the application and site visit?

From Eye Rolls to Excellence: The New Rules of Leading with Respect (Half Day, PM)

Shawana Burnette, DNP, RNC-OB, NEA-BC, CLNC, FAWHONN, Director of Nursing Excellence Programs, Advocate Health

Bobbie Smith, MSN, RN, NEA-BC, ANLC-P, Labor & Delivery/Fetal Surgery Center Manager, Children's Hospital Colorado



In today's dynamic healthcare environment, nurse leaders are navigating more than just patient care – they're managing generational clashes, shifting work ethics, and resistance to change, all while trying to move their teams forward. From Eye Rolls to Excellence: The New Rules of Leading with Respect dives into the real-world challenges of leading diverse teams with confidence, compassion, and clarity.

This session explores how to address differing values and expectations head-on, foster respectful dialogue, and master the art of difficult conversations. We'll unpack practical strategies for leaving teams strengths, managing conflict, promoting accountability, and creating a culture where every team member feels heard – and motivated to perform. You'll also learn how to guide your team through change with agility, aligning clinical excellence with business readiness in an ever-evolving healthcare landscape.

SCHEDULE & CONFERENCE INFORMATION

GENERAL ATTENDEE SCHEDULE

(Subject to change, visit synovaassociates.com for the up-to-date agenda).

Sunday, April 12th:

9:00 am – 4:30 pm: Pre-conferences
6:00 pm: First Time Attendee Reception
6:30 pm: Opening Reception

Monday, April 13th:

8:30 am – 3:30 pm: General Sessions
3:30 pm – 6:15 pm: Exhibit Hall

Tuesday, April 14th:

7:30 am – 8:30 am: Breakfast Symposium
8:30 am – 10:30 am: Exhibit Hall
10:30 am – 3:45 pm: General Sessions
6:00 pm: Dinner and Entertainment

Wednesday, April 15th:

7:30 am – 8:30 am: Breakfast Symposium
8:45 am – 1:30 pm: Track Sessions and Poster Session

Thursday, April 16th:

8:00 am – 12:00 pm: General Sessions

REGISTRATION

To register, visit: www.synovaassociates.com/nicu-leadership-forum-registration-form/

Registration will not be complete until we have received the following:

- Registration form, submitted electronically
- Full payment by credit card or hospital check. Registration fees must be paid by registration deadlines to receive discounted rates

REGISTRATION FEES

MAIN CONFERENCE REGISTRATION

- \$849 USD Early Bird Registration (ending January 18, 2026)
- \$949 USD Regular Registration
- \$1049 USD Late Registration (after February 22, if available)*

Discount available for teams of 5 or more from the same hospital.

Contact mgehl@synovaassociates.com for details.

PRE-CONFERENCE

- \$175 USD – The AAP Neonatal Excellence Program: From Start to Finish (Half Day, AM)
- \$175 USD – From Eye Rolls to Excellence: The New Rules of Leading with Respect (Half Day, PM)
- If you register for both, you will receive lunch

Since conference registration and hotel rooms are limited, early registration is advised. Registrations sent without payment will not be held after March 8.

- Out of consideration to registrants, children of any age and spouses/guests may not attend the Sessions. Guests 21 and older may attend the social event on Tuesday, April 14 for a fee (guest registration occurs onsite)
- Tuition includes continuing education hours and many meals/snacks

WHO SHOULD ATTEND?

- NICU Directors, Managers, Supervisors, and members of their leadership teams
- Advanced Practice Provider and Neonatal Nurse Practitioner Supervisors
- Clinical Nurse Specialists, Educators and Quality & Safety Leaders
- Director & Manager of Lactation Services
- VP/Executive Directors of Women's Services or Patient Care Services
- Director of Nursing

SCHOLARSHIPS

Synova Associates and conference sponsors will be granting tuition scholarships for nurse leaders to attend the NICU Leadership Forum. The scholarship application deadline is November 15, 2025. If accepted, you commit to attend the event.

*** We have reached capacity near the beginning of Late Registration the past 3 years, so don't wait to register!**



CONFERENCE INFORMATION

ACCREDITATION

The 2026 NICU Leadership Forum is approved for approximately 17 contact hours through Abbott Nutrition Health Institute. The pre-conferences will be awarded contact hours depending on the length of the program.

METHOD OF PAYMENT

Payment may be made online using Visa, Master Card or American Express. Hospital checks will be accepted if received by February 22, 2026. Registration fees must be received by the registration deadlines in order to receive the discounted rates. Payment should be made to Synova Associates, 13425 Marquette Ave, Elm Grove, WI 53122. Tax ID: 27-3903686.

CANCELLATION AND SUBSTITUTION POLICY

All cancellations, requests for refunds and substitutions must be made in writing to mgehl@synovaassociates.com, based on the following criteria:

- Cancellations requesting a refund or transfer credit: Must be received in writing by February 22, 2026. A processing fee of \$100 will be deducted from each refunded registration. No refunds will be granted after February 22, 2026.
- Attendee substitutions: Must be received in writing at any point before the conference begins.
- Attendees are responsible for canceling air travel and hotel reservations in the event of their cancellation.

PROGRAM CHANGES

Synova reserves the right to make necessary changes in speakers, topics or schedule. Please see synovaassociates.com for the most up-to-date agenda.

QUESTIONS?

Please contact Melissa Gehl at mgehl@synovaassociates.com or 414-394-3675.

HOTEL ACCOMMODATIONS

The 2026 NICU Leadership Forum will be held at the Sunseeker Resort. Sunseeker Resort, 5500 Sunseeker Way, Charlotte Harbor, FL

Book now at <https://book.passkey.com/go/SYNOVANICU26>

At Sunseeker Resort Charlotte Harbor, escape to an endlessly entertaining, totally relaxing waterfront destination where life is so simple – and simply amazing. Stay and play here. Eat and drink here. Meet and greet here. Feel like a pampered guest whether you stay at our hotel or in one of our signature Sunsuites.™

Room rates (plus tax, resort fee is waived):

- Standard room: \$229
- One bedroom suite: \$259
- Two-bedroom (2 bath) suite: \$289
- Three-bedroom (2 bath) suite: \$339

Reservations must be made prior to March 19, 2026; rooms will be available as space allows. The normal daily resort service charge is complimentary for this event. Should you need to cancel your reservation, please ensure that you do so at least 72 hours prior to arrival to prevent a cancellation fee of one night's room and tax.

AIR AND GROUND TRANSPORTATION

Punta Gorda Airport and Fort Myers Airport (RSW) are the closest airports to the conference center. Rental cars, taxis and Ubers are available.

