Illinois Recreational Therapy Association
Annual Conference
The Double Tree Hotel Chicago/Alsip
5000 W. 127th Street, Alsip, IL 60803
November 9, 2026
Virtual – November 14 – December 31, 2026

Conference Program

7:30 – 8:00 am – Registration and Continental Breakfast

8:00 – 8:30 am – Welcome and Opening Remarks

Room: Woods Ballroom

Dorothea S. DiGuido, MS, CTRS, CPRP, ILRTA Treasurer
Marcia Jean Carter, ReD, CTRS, University of St. Francis, Joliet, IL; Central Michigan University, Mt. Pleasant, MI; SUNY Cortland, Cortland, NY, Adjunct online faculty. Editor-in-Chief, *Therapeutic Recreation Journal*
Sheila Swann-Guerrero, MS, CTRS, ILRTA President

Sessions:
In person = *IP* **Virtual = *V*** **In person and Virtual = *IP/V***

8:30 – 9:30 am – General Session

The RT Escape Room: Solving Real-World Professional Challenges (.1 CEUs) IP

Room: Woods Ballroom

Speakers:
Kris Johnson, Associate Professor, Chair of Therapeutic Recreation and Neurodiversity Studies, Aurora University, Aurora, IL
Tracey Crawford, CTRS, CPRP, Senior Learning Strategist for Access to Growth Learning Solutions, Chicago, IL

Session Description: Step into a high-energy, immersive escape room designed specifically for therapeutic recreation professionals. In this collaborative experience, participants work in teams to "escape" by solving realistic, ethically grounded, and workplace-relevant challenges. Each puzzle represents a scenario commonly faced in TR practice, client dilemmas, ethical gray areas, communication breakdowns, and team conflicts.

Participants must apply critical thinking, ethical reasoning, and professional standards to unlock solutions, mirroring the real-world decision-making required in therapeutic recreation settings.

9:30 – 9:35 am – Break 

9:35 – 11:05 am – 90-Minute Sessions

Ethics in Action: Strengthening Ethical Decision Making in RT Practice (.15 CEUs) IP/V

Room: Woods Ballroom

Speaker: Patricia Thomas, MPA CTRS, Clinical Professor Emeritus, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee (UWM)

Session Description: Ethical practice is central to high-quality Recreation Therapy. Real world ethical dilemmas require more than a provider's intuition. A structured, objective decision-making process should be utilized. This session provides a focused review of essential professional resources, including the ATRA Code of Ethics, Standards of Practice, and the NCTRC Job Analysis, and demonstrates how each supports ethical clarity in daily RT work. Participants will engage in guided discussion and case-based scenario analysis to strengthen their ability to identify ethical concerns, utilize professional resources and applicable standards, consider stakeholder perspectives, and select defensible actions that uphold professional integrity.

Make it Personal: Implementing a Leisure Counseling Technique as an In-Depth Therapeutic Recreation Assessment (.15 CEUs) IP/V

Room: Pine-Oak

Speaker: Susan Myllykangas, PhD, CTRS, Professor, Northwest Missouri State University, Maryville, MO

Session Description: How do we assess what a participant really needs from us? Does a checklist really capture what is needed? Do we subconsciously add our own thoughts and needs to the assessment or is it truly the participant's? This session aligns with NCTRC Job Analysis 2.01 (Gather primary data across functional domains). Attendees will learn another way to conduct an in-depth assessment to get to the heart of what participants' needs really are. This educational technique can also be used for leisure counseling to aid in connecting participants with community resources.

9:35 – 11:05 am – 90-Minute Sessions (Cont'd)

"More Than a Sing-Along": The Therapeutic Use of Music in TR (.15 CEUs) IP

Room: Aspen-Willow

Speaker: Jennifer Stoner, MS, CTRS, CDP, CMDCP

Session Description: This session will focus on the four general benefits of using music in Therapeutic Recreation: physical, cognitive, emotional and social. Evidence-based research will be discussed. Participants will then use Activity Analysis with four specific music activities: rhythm activities with drumsticks, hand tapping, playing the kazoo, and bell choir. Skills needed for each activity will be identified and subsequent benefits explored. This session relates to the Planning and Implementation Areas of the NCTRC Job Analysis.

11:05 am – 11:15 am – Break 

11:15 – 12:15 pm – 60-Minute Sessions

The Future of Therapeutic Recreation: What Students Want You to Know (.1 CEUs) IP

Room: Woods Ballroom

Speaker: Kris Johnson, Associate Professor, Chair of Therapeutic Recreation and Neurodiversity Studies, Aurora University, Aurora, IL

Session Description: As therapeutic recreation evolves, the voices of emerging professionals are essential to shaping inclusive, responsive, and future-ready practice. This interactive panel session centers student perspectives on key issues influencing the profession today, including the integration of artificial intelligence and technology, generational perspectives on mental health, evolving definitions of inclusion and belonging, and expectations for internships and supervision. Attendees will leave with a deeper understanding of how to adapt programs, supervision styles, and organizational cultures to meet the needs of the next generation of CTRSs.

11:15 – 12:15 pm – 60-Minute Sessions (Cont'd)

From Ideas to Impact: Using Your Activity/Recreation Therapy Consultant Effectively (.1 CEUs) IP/V

Room: Pine-Oak

Speaker: Carol Gronwold, CTRS, CDP

Session Description: This session explores the valuable role of an activity/recreation therapy consultant in long-term care and how consultants can help strengthen activity and life enrichment programs. Participants will learn how consultants serve as educators, trainers, advisors, influencers, mentors, compliance resources, and program development partners who support staff professionalism, resident-centered care, staff growth, documentation accuracy, regulatory readiness, and quality-of-life outcomes. The session will highlight practical ways to use a consultant effectively, including reviewing current activity calendars and program development, attendance records, resident assessments, care plans, documentation practices, staffing patterns, supplies, and prior survey concerns. Emphasis will be placed on identifying program strengths and gaps, improving individualized programming, supporting residents with dementia or changing abilities, and implementation of programs by helping staff adapt activities to meet residents' interests, preferences, abilities, culture, and psychosocial needs. Participants will also examine how consultants can assist with staff coaching, continuing education, professional development, care planning, documentation expectations, and measurable department goals. Through this session, participants will gain a clearer understanding of how consultation can be used as a tool for quality improvement, survey readiness, staff confidence, and meaningful resident engagement.

Beyond Good Intentions: Recognizing and Addressing Ableism in Recreation Therapy and Customer Service (.1 CEUs) IP/V

Room: Aspen-Willow

Speaker: Tracey Crawford, CTRS, CPRP, Senior Learning Strategist for Access to Growth Learning Solutions, Chicago, IL

Session Description: Most professionals enter the field of recreation therapy with a commitment to inclusion, dignity, and person-centered service. Yet ableism, often unintentional and deeply embedded in societal attitudes, systems, policies, and everyday interactions, can create barriers that impact participant experiences, service delivery, and outcomes.

This engaging and interactive session will help recreation therapists recognize how ableism shows up in recreation programs, therapeutic relationships, customer service interactions, language choices, environmental design, and organizational practices.

Participants will explore the differences among accessibility, disability inclusion, and belonging while learning practical strategies to create welcoming, empowering, and equitable experiences for individuals with disabilities.

Through discussion, real-world scenarios, self-reflection activities, and actionable tools, attendees will leave with greater confidence in identifying ableist practices and implementing inclusive approaches that support belonging, dignity, and meaningful participation.

12:15 – 1:45 pm – Lunch and Annual Meeting  **Room:** Maple

1:45 – 3:15 pm – 90-Minute Sessions

Chair Chi: Seated Tai Chi for the Movement Impaired Populations (.15 CEUs) IP/V

Room: Woods Ballroom

Speaker: Pat Griffith, Tai Chi Chaun Certified Instructor, Founder of Chair Chi, Escondido, CA

Session Description: Chair Chi is a gentle exercise program developed by Pat Griffith to help people receive the benefits of traditional Tai Chi Chuan in the comfort and safety of their chair. This allows people who cannot stand or do not feel confident with their balance to participate.

EBP via AI: Gathering Evidence Based Practice Results for Recreation Therapy via the use of Artificial Intelligence Programs (.15 CEUs) IP

Room: Pine-Oak

Speaker: Susan Myllykangas, PhD, CTRS, Professor, Northwest Missouri State University, Maryville, MO

Session Description: We talk about Evidence Based Practice all the time. How many of us actually take the time to locate the evidence that the modalities that we are using have proven to be therapeutically beneficial? This session aligns with NCTRC Job Analysis 1.02 (Maintain Professional Competency). Attendees will learn to conduct an in-depth EBP search using Artificial Intelligence programs. A written prompt will be given to attendees to use so that they can gather EBP information on the modalities they are using with participants.

1:45 – 3:15 pm – 90-Minute Sessions (Cont'd)

Wits Workout®: Engaging Minds, Connecting People (.15 CEUs) IP/V

Room: Aspen-Willow

Speaker: Molly Hofer, MA, Health and Family Educator, University of Illinois Extension, Chicago, IL

Session Description: Guided by factors that support brain health (e.g., sleep, stress management, physical activity, intellectual and social engagement, and nutrition), a multidisciplinary team led by University of Illinois Extension educators developed and implemented Wits Workout® (WW). This evidence-informed, interactive program model serves to strengthen social connections and promote intellectual engagement among participants 60 and older. Recreation therapists will learn about the content and delivery of WW and how it can support them in helping their clients maintain or adopt long-term health promoting behaviors. Key takeaways from a multi-year study of a WW lay leader facilitator model implemented in 14 rural Illinois locations will be shared, including participant outcomes in socialization and self-efficacy to practice healthy behaviors.

3:15 – 3:30 pm – Break

3:30 – 5:00 pm – 60- and 90-Minute Sessions

Beyond Behavior Management: Rethinking Our Role in Therapeutic Recreation (.15 CEUs) IP/V

Room: Woods Ballroom

Speaker: Carrie Gascoigne, CTRS, Superintendent, Northern Will County Special Recreation Association (NWCSRSA), ILRTA Past President

Session Description: Therapeutic recreation professionals are increasingly supporting individuals whose emotional dysregulation, physical behaviors, rigid or linear thinking, and other challenges can impact successful participation in group recreation. While inclusion and access remain important, simply being in a recreation program does not necessarily mean an individual is experiencing meaningful or therapeutic participation.

This session will explore the question: "Is this individual successfully participating—or are we simply keeping them in the room?" This session will look at how assessment, planning, implementation, evaluation, and documentation can help determine when a recreation environment is supporting success and when modifications, alternative approaches, or a different recreation setting may better meet an individual's needs. The

session will also address the balance between individual needs, safety, staffing ratios, and protecting the recreation experience of other participants.

Through examples and discussion, participants will explore alternatives to simply managing behavior or removing an individual from a group, with an emphasis on creating recreation opportunities that promote meaningful participation, safety, autonomy, and success for everyone.

A Parent's Perspective of Recreation Therapy Services and Disability (.15 CEUs) IP

Room: Pine-Oak

Speaker: Kim Shepard, CTRS, MPH

Session Description: This session will reflect on the way RT/TR affect not just the client as an individual but their family and/or support network. The presenter identifies as disabled and is mother of two children with multiple disabilities. This presentation will reflect on a disability-empowered approach to RT/TR as well as various care approaches and aspects that providers may not be aware of unless they are a part of the Disabled Community or a family member, including tokenism, social stigma, caregiver mental health, staggered expenses, and more. We will reflect on the CTRSs role as a social support and advocate for both the client and their family/support network.

Ageless Grace®: Brain and Body Health Fitness for Increased Benefits of Recreation Therapy (.1 CEUs) IP

Room: Aspen-Willow

Speaker: Jenna Eisenberg, DC, Ageless Grace ® Certified Trainer, Wheaton, IL

Session Description: Participants will experience the 21 simple, playful movements of Ageless Grace®, a brain and body fitness program performed while seated and designed for people of all ages and abilities. Each movement is based on everyday motions that stimulate the five primary functions of the brain-strategic planning, memory and recall, analytical thinking, creativity and kinesthetic learning. As each tool is demonstrated, participants will learn its purpose and the physical, cognitive and emotional benefits it provides. The session combines educational content with interactive experience that can immediately be applied in recreational therapy settings to promote cognitive wellness, mobility, coordination, social engagement and joyful participation of clients. Attendees will leave with practical strategies they can incorporate into individual and group programs to support healthy aging, neuroplasticity and overall quality of life in an inclusive, fun and accessible way.

Virtual Only Sessions - November 14 – December 31, 2026

Wired for Connection: Science of Happiness, Friendship, and Loneliness (.15 CEUs) V

Speaker: Shay Dawson, PhD, Professor of Disability Studies & Community Inclusion as well as Recreational Therapy and Rehabilitation, College of Education and Human Services, Central Michigan University, Mount Pleasant, MI

Session Description: This session covers the biological predisposition that humans have for social connection, as well as the subsequent health-related risk of being lonely. Topics related to loneliness, friendship reciprocity, social connections during illness and disability, social prescribing, and the value of leisure as a social connector will be discussed. Those attending will also have an opportunity to complete the UCLA Loneliness assessment as well as an egocentric social network analysis, both of which are useful for clients.

It's Up to All of Us - Practical Advocacy in Everyday Life for the Recreational Therapist (.1 CEUs) V

Speaker: Dawn DeVries, DHA, CTRS, FDRT, Professor and Program Director of Recreational Therapy at Grand Valley State University, Grand Rapids, MI

Session Description: Advocacy is not limited to formal activities like legislative visits or leadership roles. In fact, it is an essential part of everyday practice. Recreational therapists advocate when they educate others about the value of services, promote inclusion and accessibility, support clients' self-determination, and communicate the needs of individuals and communities.

This session will explore how the skills and competencies recreational therapists already have provide a strong foundation for effective advocacy. Participants will examine advocacy at the individual, organizational, and professional levels. Practical strategies for incorporating advocacy into their daily work will be presented. Participants will leave with a better understanding of advocacy, as well as increased confidence and actionable strategies, to advance recreational therapy practice through everyday advocacy.

When Client Strengths Stay Invisible: The Human Readiness Gap in Recreational Therapy (.1 CEUs) V

Speaker: Sheena Yap Chan, Author

Session Description: Recreational therapists work across complex settings where participation, connection, autonomy, identity, and quality of life are central to care. Yet

meaningful participation does not happen through programming alone. Clients may have strengths, preferences, needs, and goals that remain hidden when confidence, communication, trust, culture, disability, trauma, or system barriers limit their voice.

This session introduces Human Readiness and the VISIBLE™ Framework — Voice, Identity, Spotlight, Inner Work, Belief, Leverage, and Elevation — as a practical solution for strengthening client-centered recreational therapy practice. Participants will learn how confidence and visibility function as measurable readiness factors that affect assessment, therapeutic relationships, advocacy, program engagement, interdisciplinary collaboration, and client outcomes.

Attendees will leave with a repeatable framework for identifying hidden readiness gaps and designing more inclusive, strengths-based participation strategies. Because recreational therapy is not only about offering activities. It is about helping people become ready to participate in life with meaning, dignity, and voice.

Integrating AI in Recreational Therapy in Safe, Ethical, and Effective Ways (.1 CEUs) V

Speaker: Susan Purrington, PhD, CTRS, Harold F. Wiley Generative AI Teaching and Learning Fellow, Connecticut College, New London, CT

Session Description: Artificial intelligence tools are increasingly available to recreational therapists, yet many practitioners are unsure how, or whether, to use them responsibly. This session applies the AI for Education SEE Framework (2026) to recreational therapy (RT) practice by reviewing practical, low-risk applications grounded in NCTRC Job Analysis competencies including professionalism, planning, and evaluation and documentation. Participants will explore how the framework can be used to evaluate any AI tool before adopting it, covering data privacy, clinical judgment, bias, and confidentiality (HIPAA) considerations specific to therapeutic recreation service delivery. Participants will leave with concrete next steps and language they can bring back to their departments to start, or continue, a conversation about safe, ethical, and effective AI use in recreational therapy practice.