

Memoir and Black Women's Health

Tulane University's 5th
Biennial Black Women's
Health Conference

February 17, 2024

*Dr. Martin Luther King Charter School
5300 Rocheblave
New Orleans, Louisiana 70117*

*www.bwhconference.com
BWHConference@wave.tulane.edu*

Black Women's Health Task Force At Tulane University Welcomes Conference Participants to New Orleans, Louisiana

TWELVE YEARS AGO, A GROUP OF FACULTY AND STAFF FROM TULANE UNIVERSITY AND COMMUNITY ORGANIZERS WORKING IN METRO NEW ORLEANS CONVENED TO BRAINSTORM WAYS TO ORGANIZE CONSCIOUS THOUGHT AND PURPOSEFUL ACTION TOWARD IMPROVING HEALTH OUTCOMES FOR BLACK WOMEN AND GIRLS. THE GROUP WAS DRIVEN, IN PART, BY DISPARITY STATISTICS THAT CHARACTERIZE THE HEALTH AND WELLBEING OF BLACK WOMEN AND GIRLS IN COMPARISON WITH OTHER GROUPS. BUT WE WERE ALSO MOTIVATED BY THE LONGER HISTORY OF STRUGGLE FOR HUMAN RIGHTS, CIVIL RIGHTS, AND EQUAL PROTECTION UNDER THE LAW, WHICH SHOWS THAT STRATEGIC COORDINATION OF PEOPLE WORKING WITHIN AND OUTSIDE ACADEMIA HAS ALWAYS PLAYED A VITAL ROLE IN INSPIRING, SUPPORTING, AND SUSTAINING MASS EFFORTS TOWARD CHANGING AND IMPROVING HEALTH OUTCOMES FOR PEOPLE OF COLOR. WITH THE PIONEERING EFFORTS OF ORGANIZATIONS SUCH AS THE BLACK WOMEN'S HEALTH IMPERATIVE AND THE INSTITUTE OF WOMEN AND ETHNIC STUDIES AS MODELS, THE BLACK WOMEN'S HEALTH TASK FORCE AT TULANE UNIVERSITY WAS FOUNDED ON A PHILOSOPHY OF AWARENESS-RAISING AND RESULTS-ORIENTED ACTION.

BIENNIALLY, THE BLACK WOMEN'S HEALTH TASK FORCE AT TULANE UNIVERSITY HOSTS A CONFERENCE IN NEW ORLEANS, LOUISIANA THAT GIVES PRACTITIONERS, ACADEMICS, COMMUNITY ACTIVISTS, AND COMMUNITY MEMBERS THE OPPORTUNITY TO COME TOGETHER AND FORMULATE A COMMON VOCABULARY FOR FOSTERING BLACK WOMEN'S HEALTH AND WELLNESS. THIS YEAR'S THEME, "MEMOIR AND BLACK WOMEN'S HEALTH," INFORMS A RICH VARIETY OF WORKSHOPS, PRESENTATIONS, AND PLENARY DISCUSSIONS THAT ILLUSTRATE HOW BLACK WOMEN HAVE WRITTEN THEMSELVES INTO EXISTENCE, THROUGH TRAUMA, AND AROUND OBSTACLES AND, IN THESE WAYS, UNDERScoreD THE INDISPENSABLE ROLE THAT MEMOIR PLAYS IN EVIDENCING AND FOSTERING BLACK WOMEN'S HEALTH.

THE TASK FORCE IS ESPECIALLY GRATEFUL FOR THE SUPPORT WE RECEIVED TO HOST THIS YEAR'S CONFERENCE FROM THE NEWCOMB COLLEGE INSTITUTE AND LAVIN-BERNICK FACULTY GRANT PROGRAM AT TULANE UNIVERSITY. WE ARE ALSO ESPECIALLY GRATEFUL TO OUR LONGSTANDING COMMUNITY PARTNER, DR. MARTIN KING CHARTER SCHOOL, FOR SERVING AS THE CONFERENCE SITE. AS WELL, WE THANK YOU FOR YOUR PARTICIPATION AND CONTRIBUTIONS TO ADVANCING THE VISION AND MISSION OF THE BLACK WOMEN'S HEALTH CONFERENCE TASK FORCE AT TULANE UNIVERSITY. WELCOME TO NEW ORLEANS!

**BLACK WOMEN'S HEALTH CONFERENCE TASK FORCE
TULANE UNIVERSITY**



PROGRAM

Saturday, February 17, 2024
Dr. Martin Luther King Charter School
5300 Rocheblave
New Orleans, LA 70117

OPENING

8:00AM – 9:00AM

Breakfast & On-Site Registration

9:00AM – 9:15AM

Welcome

Auditorium
Councilman Oliver Thomas

9:15AM – 10:00AM

Morning Plenary Session **Auditorium**

SESALI BOWEN

Known for being a self-proclaimed bad fat Black girl and a "fat femme," Sesali Bowen is a body positivity activist who has helped to bring trap feminism to the forefront of intersectionality, which she writes about in *Bad Fat Black Girl: Notes From a Trap Feminist* (2021). Bowen is a proud champion of Black girls with nearly 45,000 Instagram followers, who look to her for plus-size style, confidence and an authentic perspective on life. Aside from her successful career as an entertainment journalist, Bowen is one of the subjects in *Black Girl Church*, a documentary about Black women and one of their magically sacred spaces: the beauty supply store.

10:00AM – 10:15AM

Break

10:15AM – 11:15AM

Concurrent Workshops

"Women's Health: Advocacy in Action"
Library

Panelists: Alma Stewart Allen, RN, MS, CCHC;
Dr. Terri L. Byrd; Keri Monks; Dynisha Benson

This session will describe the successful campaign to establish the Office of Women's Health and Community Partnership; what we envision as next steps for partners and the office as the work continues; and how this work promotes civic and community engagement in relation to women's health.

PROGRAM

"From Ancestors to Algorithms: Black Women and Digital Health Literacy for Memoir and Black Women's Health" Rm 1202

Tomesha Campbell

Due to the rise of misinformation in digital media, digital health literacy is a crucial medium for Black women to make informed health decisions in this ever-evolving healthcare landscape. This workshop will address digital health literacy and its profound impact on the healthcare experiences of Black women. Acknowledging the ancestral fortitude that has carried them through historical adversities, particularly under the weight of systemic oppression, this workshop will highlight both the barriers and pathways to accessing vital healthcare information within digital media.

"Breastfeeding Equity for Black Women: A Georgia Case Study" Rm 1301

Dr. Kim Gadsden-Knowles

This workshop presents findings from an investigation of equity-oriented policies, practices, and programs that support breastfeeding in the hospital and in the community, and how these initiatives were implemented. The researcher drew heavily from the stories of black women, which related barriers to breastfeeding equity in both hospital and community contexts. To this end, an exploratory, multiple case study using an action research and appreciative inquiry approach was conducted with Baby-Friendly Hospitals in the Atlanta, GA metropolitan area. The researcher found that the current, future, and ideal state of breastfeeding equity for black women relies heavily on policies, practices, and programs that are shaped and informed by black women's lived experiences.

PROGRAM

"Post-Roe Impact on Black Women's Health"

Rm 1303

DeShawn Taylor, MD

Black pregnant and birthing people face barriers to accessing the full range of quality, culturally appropriate care throughout the spectrum of decisions they may make about their pregnancies and birth. Now, more than ever, it is extremely important to connect the dots between access to abortion care and Black women's health. This workshop explores the historical context for the reproductive health inequities we see today and the intersections of rising maternal mortality, the status of abortion access in America, and criminalization of pregnancy outcomes with Black women's health.

11:15AM -12:15PM

Concurrent Panels

Panel I: Vestiges of Slavery Rm 1301

Dr. Deidre Hayes, DSW, LCSW-BACS,
BCD
Facilitator

**"Zora Neale Hurston's Theorization of the
Spiritual/Energetic Effects of White Sexual
Abuse of Black Women and Girls in
'Drenched in Light' and *Seraph on the
Suwanee*"**

Dr. Jane Caputi

This presentation focuses on representation of exploitative exchanges in relation to a White person's abuse of a Black girl in Zora Neale Hurston's "Drenched in Light" and *Seraph on the Suwanee*. Though fiction, these works might also contain aspects of memoir. "Drenched in Light," often seen as a light-hearted and semi-autobiographical story about a lively child and a kind stranger, can alternately be read as a horror story, Hurston's way to tell about, and analyze, something terrible that happened to her in childhood. The specific exploitation of Black girls is also presented in Hurston's last novel *Seraph on the Suwanee*, which provides an analysis of what today is understood as ecowomanism or ecofeminism.

PROGRAM

"I was Born Into Jim Crow: Theorized Beginnings"

Jeanette Coleman

This presentation explores my lived experiences during Jim Crow. The time frame and location explain the context of segregation, sharecropping, and the onset of the Civil Rights Movement. By theorizing my lived experiences, I engage in what Sarah Wall calls a "qualitative method that offers a way of giving voice to personal experience for the purpose of extending sociological understanding." While autoethnography is not the same as memoir, it is important to recognize the role African American women's narratives of self, in relation to place and time, play in navigating the various forms of oppression we experience and survive.

Panel II: Mental Health in/and Virtual Spaces Rm 1303

Dr. Rebecca Chaisson, PhD, LCSW, Facilitator

"Overcoming Visible Challenges to Self-Esteem and Mental Health: The Power My Childhood Stutter Taught Me"

Kennetia Brooks

This presentation considers lessons learned, coping mechanisms, and empathy-building tools in relation to negotiating speech disorder and (re)claiming self-worth. Implications of personal struggle with barriers to speech are considered and drawn out for persons struggling with other speech, cognitive, and developmental disorders.

"Black Women's Digital Spaces for Mental Health"

Bria Nickerson

Social media, a virtual form of narrative communication, has many advantages and disadvantages related to black women's health. Social media consumption can lead to disordered eating, poor self-esteem and body image concerns, heightened chronic stress, mental health problems, and reinforcement of harmful stereotypes. Social media can be used to educate, protest, and form community. This presentation examines the ways social media impacts the mental health of Black women, especially in relation to fostering a space of belonging, acceptance, and self-expression.

PROGRAM

Panel III: (Re)Building Women's Health

Rm 1202

Dr. Sika Dagbovie
Facilitator

"Softball, Baseball, and Dugouts"

Dr. Liza Swedarsky

This presentation excerpts parts of Dr. Liza Swedarsky's memoir to demonstrate how self-writing can be used to break intergenerational patterns of remembered trauma, despite its "triggering" effects. In writing the piece and telling her story, Dr. Swedarsky emphasizes how the body can be re-triggered at any time. However, the act of writing creates a pathway to self-liberation, affirmation, and healing.

"Are We Really Concerned about All Women's Health?"

Syrita Steib and Dr. Victoria Williams

This presentation outlines findings from the work of Operation Restoration, a 501c3 organization that builds a community and support system for women impacted by incarceration. These findings challenge us to reframe our thinking about black women's health, by centering the lived experiences of women impacted by the ever-evolving landscape of criminal legal reform in America.

Panel IV: Black Girl Joy--Redefining Movements Library

This panel explores how Millennial, Generation Z and Generation Alpha are in search for movements that seek to amplify Black Girlhood, advocating for childhood, adolescent years, and young adult years that are rooted in joy instead of generational trauma. The presentations reflect on the canon works of Black feminist scholars and seeks to connect a line through their work to the new movements today across social media communities, advocacy groups, the performing and entertainment arts, and grassroots efforts to transform Black girlhood. The presentations highlight how new movements provide a space for voice and empowerment centering the wellbeing of Black girls and young Black women as part of their full liberation in a society that is often hostile to their race, gender and age.

#BlackGirlLuxury trend : I can do bad - all by myself

Katherine Jones

Wish I can be: Black Girl Representation and the Black Mermaid

Brier Evans

Toned: In Search of a Colorism Movement

Ming Tate

Show Up For You, Community and Coping for the Eldest Black Daughter

Aarinii Parms-Green

From Taboo to Affirmation: Black Girlhood and Sexual Health

Osoniya Wodi

12:15PM - 1:00PM

**LUNCH
CAFETERIA**

PROGRAM

1:00PM – 2:00PM

Keynote Roundtable Discussion

Featuring Dr. Joan Morgan

Auditorium

“Catching Up with Our Sister: A Hip Hop Feminist Update on the State of Black Women’s Health”

Dr. Sika Dagbovie

Dr. Regis Fox

Discussants

Dr. Joan Morgan is a Jamaican-American essayist, memoirist, and journalist, who coined the term “hip hop feminist,” in her germinal study, *When Chickenheads Come Home to Roost: A Hip Hop Feminist Breaks It Down* (1999). Dr. Morgan served as the Black Women’s Health Conference’s keynote speaker at the inaugural conference that took place at Tulane in 2012. Currently, Dr. Morgan is the program director of the Center for Black Visual Culture at New York University. In 2018, she published *She Begat This: 20 Years of the Miseducation of Lauryn Hill*, with Simon & Schuster.

2:10PM – 3:00PM

Closing Plenary Session: “HerStories: Where Do We Go from Here?”

Auditorium

Professor Deleso A. Alford is a Shreveport, Louisiana native doing ground-breaking work bridging legal and medical education by telling stories—what she refers to as “HER stories”—the unique and particularized lived experiences of black women intersecting with health care and research. Professor Alford’s groundbreaking 2012 law review article, *HeLa Cells and Unjust Enrichment in the Human Body*, played a pivotal role in shaping the legal strategy of co-lead counsels Ben Crump and Robert Klonoff in *Estate of Henrietta Lacks v. Thermo Fisher Scientific Inc.* (US. Dist. MD). In addition to her work as a legal scholar, Professor Alford has served as Adjunct Faculty, Associate Professor of Medicine (Medical Education) at the University of Central Florida (UCF) College of Medicine, and Co-Director of the Longitudinal Curricular Themes (LCT) in Culture, Health, and Society (2014– 2018).

Biographies

Professor Delaso A. Aflord



Alma C. Stewart Allen



Dynisha Benson



Sesali Bowen



Dr. Terry L. Byrd



Tomesha Campbell



Jane Caputi



Jeanette Coleman



Dr. Kim Gadsden-Knowles



Bria Nickerson



Joan Morgan



Kheri Monks



Syrita Steib



Dr. Liza Swedarky



Dr. Deshawn Taylor



Dr. Victoria Williams





Deleso A. Alford

Professor Deleso A. Alford is a Shreveport, Louisiana native doing ground-breaking work bridging legal and medical education by telling stories—what she refers to as "HER stories"—the unique and particularized lived experiences of black women intersecting with health care and research. She has moved her scholarship into classrooms and the courtroom, benefiting law and medical students, society at large with her racially inflected lessons.

Professor Alford earned a B.S., magna cum laude at Southern University A&M College, a J.D. at Southern University Law Center, and an LL.M. at Georgetown University Law Center. She has a Certification in Clinical Bioethics from the Medical College of Wisconsin.

Deleso A. Alford, the Rachel Emanuel Endowed Professor is also serving as the director of the off-campus instructional site (OCIS) team facilitating the establishment of a pathway to legal education opportunities to the north Louisiana region, <https://www.sulc.edu/news/4211>. She was recently appointed as the Managing Fellow for the Southern University Law Center (SULC) Health Equity Law & Policy Institute.



Alma C. Stewart Allen

Alma Stewart Allen, RN, MS, CCHC

Alma Stewart Allen is the founding president of the Louisiana Center for Health Equity. She is an avid public health advocate. Throughout her decades long career, she has testified during countless legislative hearings, spearheaded numerous advocacy campaigns and addressed social and political determinants of health in a manner that boldly places the needs of disparate populations at the forefront of Louisiana's political and social agenda. Mrs. Allen's strong convictions and uncanny ability to engage community stakeholders at the grassroots level have earned recognition on national, state and local stages. She is championing the LCHE Bold Vision LA 40 by 2030 to improve the health outcomes and quality of life for Louisiana children and families.



Dynisha Benson

With a burning passion for health equity and environmental justice, Dynisha Benson is a recent public health graduate in pursuit of a career in health law and policy. Currently working in public service for her state's health department, she is cognizant of the gaps in our fragmented health care system and looks forward to participating in processes that address these gaps and deliver justice to those made vulnerable due to inadequate policies and social systems.

With an extensive history of volunteerism and community involvement, engaging in community work is where she discovers the most gratifying sense of fulfillment.



Sesali Bowen

Sesali Bowen is a multifaceted author and cultural commentator. She is the author of the acclaimed 2021 memoir/manifesto, *Bad Fat Black Girl: Notes From A Trap Feminist* and the creator, producer, and co-host of *Purse First*, the only podcast exclusively about female and queer rap. After pivoting from an early career in political advocacy, Sesali stepped into the media world in 2016 and didn't look back. She was an entertainment writer at Refinery29 and one of the architects of Unbothered, their sub-brand for Black women. Then she oversaw the entertainment vertical at NYLON magazine before branching out to write her first book. Her writing has appeared in *The New York Times*, *Cosmopolitan*, *Glamour*, *InStyle*, and more. She has also appeared on Netflix's *Explained* and worked on campaigns for Showtime, VH1, and BLK to name a few.

She is currently working on another book project and providing behind-the-scenes content strategy for brands, entertainers, and athletes. Sesali was born and raised on the Southside of Chicago and currently lives in New Jersey.



Dr. Terri L Byrd

Dr. Terri L Byrd is a daughter, sister, friend, entrepreneur, and servant visionary leader. She is the developer and content creator of the weekly YouTube podcasts Motivation Monday Inspirational Moments and My Single Life. Founder of the Daughters of Zion United organization dedicated to discipling, encouraging, influencing, and mentoring women. Also founded Dot 2 Dot Resource Connection, a nonprofit educational services organization, to provide resources to school age underserved youth and their families. In 2021 Dr. Byrd was selected as a finalist for the WBRZ Remarkable Woman Award. Her greatest reward is helping women discover their God given purpose.



Tomesha Campbell

Tomesha Campbell is a distinguished leader in the healthcare industry, drawing upon over seven years of experience to advocate for equitable healthcare for Black women. As the visionary founder of Enhance Black Women's Health, Tomesha's mission centers around empowering healthcare providers with the knowledge and tools necessary to address the unique challenges Black women face in their pursuit of optimal health.

Her impact reverberates through prominent health organizations, including Health Union, Autoimmune Wellness, and Autoimmune Paleo (AIP) Certified Coach, where she is a highly regarded contributor. In addition to her wealth of experience, Tomesha holds vital certifications, including Fitness Nutrition Coach (FNC), Precision Nutrition (PN) Level 1 Certified Coach, and AIP Certified Coach. These qualifications exemplify her unwavering dedication to ensuring every Black woman receives the care and attention she deserves. Beyond her professional endeavors, Tomesha cherishes moments exploring trails with her beloved rescue dog, Penny Deena. This personal connection to wellness and companionship further underscores her commitment to holistic health and her ability to relate to the diverse experiences of Black women in pursuit of equitable healthcare.



Dr. Jane Caputi

Jane Caputi is Professor of Women, Gender and Sexuality Studies at Florida Atlantic University. She has written several books, most recently *Call Your "Mutha"': A Deliberately Dirty-Minded Manifesto for the Earth Mother in the Anthropocene* (Oxford University Press, 2020).



Jeanette Coleman

“I was born the 3rd youngest into a sharecropper's family of 11 in rural Virginia. Some of us migrated to NYC when I was 13. Even though I was an unwed teenage mother, I finished high school on time and started my college education at Hunter College, CUNY. I later joined the Air Force, finished my undergraduate degree, and started graduate school to become a teacher. I retired from the Air Force after serving 22 years. After retirement, I have completed 3 master's degrees: Teaching and Learning (Purdue Global), English Literature (National University Online), and Women's Gender and Sexuality Studies (FAU). Presently, I am a nontraditional Ph.D. student at Florida Atlantic University (FAU), in Comparative Studies, Cultures, Languages, and Literatures. Teaching experience: English Composition and African American Literature (Broward College, 2009 - 2022); Introduction to the Humanities (Purdue Global, 2010-2021); Women of Color in the U.S., Introduction to Women's Studies, Introduction to Gender and Sexuality, and Gender and Sport” (FAU, 2016 - present).



Dr. Kim Gadsden-Knowles

Dr. Kim Gadsden-Knowles has over 25 years of experience in local, state, and federal public health practice. Since 2005, Dr. Gadsden-Knowles has worked at the federal level gaining expertise in emergency preparedness and response, informatics, surveillance, health equity, social determinants of health, and antiracism. Dr. Gadsden-Knowles obtained her Doctor of Public Health from the University of Illinois Chicago School of Public Health in 2023 where her dissertation research focused on breastfeeding equity for Black women. She also holds an MPH in Epidemiology from Columbia University Mailman School of Public Health and a Master of Science in Social Research from Hunter College.



Bria Nickerson

Bria Nickerson is a second-year master's student at the University at Albany working towards a degree in Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies. She holds a bachelor's degree in criminal justice from Penn State, and two minors in Psychology and Sociology. Her research interests include Black women's health and healthcare accessibility, Black women's trauma and healing practices, and sexual violence. In addition to being a graduate student, Bria teaches a class on feminist pedagogy and manages a program at her university called the "Teaching Collective," which prepares undergraduate students to teach their peers topics within feminism. When Bria is not doing schoolwork, teaching, or working, she spends her time hanging out with her loved ones in her hometown of NYC, cooking, watching YouTube vlogs, listening to podcasts, and scrolling through Reddit.



Dr. Joan Morgan

Dr. Joan Morgan is the Program Director of the Center for Black Visual Culture at New York University. She is an award-winning cultural critic, feminist author, Grammy nominated songwriter and a pioneering hip-hop journalist. Morgan coined the term “hip-hop feminism” in 1999, when she published the groundbreaking book, *When Chickenheads Come Home to Roost: A Hip-Hop Feminist Breaks it Down* which is taught at universities globally. Regarded internationally as an expert on the topics of hip-hop, race and gender, Morgan has made numerous television, radio and film appearances. She has been a Visiting Scholar at The New School, Vanderbilt, Duke and Stanford Universities. She was a Visiting Assistant Professor at her alma mater, New York University, in the department of Social and Cultural Analysis. Her most recent book is *She Begat This: 20 Years of the Miseducation of Lauryn Hill*. Jamaican-born and South Bronx bred, Morgan is a proud Native New Yorker.



Kheri Monks

Kheri Monks is a leading IT Coach, children's book author, inventor and maternal health advocate. She is currently the president of the National Congress of Black Women Greater Baton Rouge Region and a member of the Special Education Advisory Council for Ascension Parish. She is a wife, preemie mom of 3, bonus mom, and the owner of The Preemie Mom Coach where she provides peer support and shares resources to families affected by the NICU. As a special needs mom, she makes sure her children are included in extracurricular activities to continuously engage with their peers.



Syrita Steib

Syrita Steib is the founder, president, and CEO of Operation Restoration, a nonprofit organization dedicated to the support of women and girls impacted by incarceration. Through Operation Restoration and her legislative advocacy, Syrita has helped thousands of women and families to restore their lives, recognize their full potential, discover new possibilities and removes barriers that lead to economic inequities

Syrita's fight for the rights of women and girls impacted by incarceration began with her own personal struggle. At 19, she was sentenced to 120 months in federal prison, 20 years in state prison, and \$1.9 million in restitution for her involvement in a crime of theft and transportation of automobiles across state lines. Syrita was granted a full pardon from President Donald J. Trump in January 2021. On the legislative front, she is best known in the state for her "Ban the Box" initiative for public colleges and universities. Syrita wrote and advocated for the successful passage of Louisiana Act 276, which prohibits public post-secondary institutions from asking questions relating to criminal history for purposes of admissions. Louisiana began the first state in the country to pass this law. At the national level, Syrita was instrumental in the drafting and passing of the First Step Act. This legislation enacted several changes in U.S. federal criminal law aimed at reforming federal prisons and sentencing laws to reduce recidivism, decrease the federal incarcerated population and maintain public safety. Seeing the need for reform at the national level, in 2022 she became a candidate for the U.S. Senate from Louisiana. Syrita's platform focused on five points: infrastructure, education, women's rights, energy and collaboration as the keys for Louisiana to take center stage in America's economic, political and technological development.

Syrita regularly speaks about the experiences of incarcerated women. She has been a panelist at Essence Festival in 2018, 2019, and 2022. Syrita was named a 2020 Rubinger Fellow and was an Unlocked Futures Fellow with New Profit and John Legend. Syrita is also one of only five recipients of the 500 Women Scientists' Fellowship for the Future awards. Her fellowship project trains incarcerated women as lab assistants for healthcare facilities. In 2021, she was recognized as one of the New Orleans 500, New Orleans Women of the Year and a Young Leadership Council Role Model. Syrita was named a 2020 Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Louisiana Angel Award Honoree, and a recipient of the Black Voices for Black Justice Fund award. Syrita was also named a Culture of Health Leader by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation.

Syrita is also a policy consultant for Cut50's Dignity for Incarcerated Women campaign. She is one of the co-creators and developers of "Per(Sister): Incarcerated Women in Louisiana" in partnership with Tulane University's Newcomb Art Museum. Syrita also co-curated the museum's current exhibit, "Unthinkable Imagination."



Dr. Liza Swedarsky

Liza Swedarsky MD currently practices as a gynecologist and Minimally Invasive Surgeon and has dedicated her career to eliminating gynecologic and surgical option disparities for BIPOC women and women experiencing marginalization due to their socioeconomic background. She is an Associate Gynecologist at Brigham and Women's Hospital and the Founder and CEO of Heath Vows, LLC. She is also a clinical instructor at Harvard Medical School. She has served as a gynecologic consultant and surgeon in seven of Boston's Community Health Centers since 2006 providing office procedures, laparoscopic and robotic surgical options, and counseling.

Liza has been named as one of Boston's Top Doctors for the past five years.

Liza is also a licensed spiritual practitioner through the Centers for Spiritual Living and is a seeker, metaphysician, and mystic. As a practitioner she helps individuals identify what experiences and belief systems continue to impact their lives and ability to live healthily. She was initially awakened by her own personal healing journey diagnosed with Crohn's disease at age 23 while a third year medical student and has been in clinical remission for over 25 years by making conscious choices around health, exercise, and implementing daily meditation and mindfulness practices. She also studies ayurveda and is currently a student at the University of Metaphysics pursuing a degree in the Art of Spiritual Healing and Metaphysical Sciences. She has presented workshops aligning with community organizations, churches, New Thought communities and conferences bridging understanding how to apply medical knowledge, mindfulness practices, and spiritual practice to set goals in optimizing health.

Her philosophy and true passion is to care for the whole woman: mind, body, and spirit. She facilitates weekly workshops inspired by universal truths and presents activities to heighten consciousness and inspire individual behavioral changes to optimize health and help women navigate the social determinants of health. She empowers women to recognize and harness their internal power to manifest their highest vision of perfect health. She created the Health Vows Program and workshop series which has been implemented in person and regularly on zoom capturing audiences across the United States. The Health Vows Program was an award recipient from the Massachusetts League of Community Health Centers District Statewide Reinvestment Program's Behavioral Health Special Projects Grant. Dr. Swedarsky also received a Brigham Care Redesign Incubator Start Up program grant in 2020 aimed to show the Health Vows Program works to decrease health inequities and disparities by targeting individual behavior changes.

She recognizes true transformation, self-care, and change begin in the mind after experiencing and overcoming her own health challenges during her medical training. She feels to eliminate health disparities and inequities women need self-empowerment, self-advocacy, and educational tools so they can better navigate complex health care systems. She created and facilitates the Health Vows Program in order to Promote Healthy, Conscious Living.

Liza also is an avid reader, lifelong student and is a mother of two teenagers. She engages in daily meditation practice, teaches meditation, practices yoga, loves travel, food, film, dance, and art.



Dr. Deshawn Taylor

Dr. DeShawn Taylor, MD (she/her) is a Phoenix, Arizona based, award-winning Gynecologist and Family Planning Specialist, Gender Affirming Care Provider, Reproductive Justice Activist, Author and Speaker whose work advances reproductive health care access through direct services, education and training, advocacy, and leadership. Dr. Taylor sees patients and facilitates coalition work and community programs with the nonprofit that she founded, Desert Star Institute for Family Planning, and helps advocate-minded individuals examine dominant societal narratives about abortion with her consulting company, Health Justice MD. Her book "Undue Burden: A Black Woman Physician on Being Christian and Pro-abortion in the Reproductive Justice Movement" provides a new prism from which to address the attack on abortion rights in America.



Dr. Victoria Williams

Dr. Victoria Williams, a dedicated force for positive change, has left an indelible mark on the global stage and remains steadfast in her commitment to making a lasting impact. Currently serving on the boards of local organizations such as Postpartum Support International (PSI) and the Louisiana Community Health Outreach Network (LACHON), as well as the Louisiana Pregnancy-Associated Mortality Review (LaPAMR), Victoria is at the forefront of initiatives aimed at enhancing birth outcomes for Louisiana residents.

Her tireless efforts are evident in the ongoing development of training programs, community support structures, and essential services. Victoria is poised to unveil outstanding birth outcome results that will benefit families across the state, reflecting her unwavering dedication to the community's well-being.

Victoria's influence extends beyond local boards, as she played a pivotal role in shaping public policy as a core team member establishing the Mama+ Health Package. This innovative project, focused on addressing the maternal health crisis and eliminating disparities for Black birthing individuals in New Orleans, comprises local and state-level legislation across nine titles.

Victoria's leadership was instrumental in crafting these titles, driving legislative activities to significantly impact Black birthing individuals' health and birth outcomes throughout the state.

In addition to her professional accomplishments, Dr. Williams is a passionate wife and mother of three girls. Holding a doctorate in Healthcare Administration and wearing multiple hats as a Licensed Master Social Worker, Doula, Maternal Child Health Consultant, Perinatal Community Health Worker, and Advocacy/Outreach Lead, she brings a wealth of experience to each role. With a profound background in these fields, Victoria takes great joy in supporting, guiding, and enriching the lives of families within the community, ensuring they thrive during transformative times.