



State of Black Maternal Health: Examining the Racial Disparity

Hosted by the New Jersey Division on Civil Rights (DCR)
April 13, 2023 @ 6:30PM – 8:00PM via ZOOM

Welcome & Opening Remarks

- **Tisha Leonardo-Santiago**, Interim Director of Outreach & Community Relations, New Jersey Division on Civil Rights

Panel Discussion

Moderator:

- **Kai Durant**, Community Relations Specialist, New Jersey Division on Civil Rights

Speakers:

- **Crystal Charley**, Founding Executive Director, Melanin and Maternal Wellness
- **Dr. Lisa Gittens-Williams, MD**, Director of Obstetrics at University Hospital
- **Aarin Williams**, Interim Chief of Strategic Initiatives & Enforcement, New Jersey Division on Civil Rights

Q&A

- Open Questions & Answer Session

Closing Remarks

- Moderator

Conclusion

Speakers & Biographies



Tisha M. Leonardo-Santiago

(she/they) is the Interim Director of Outreach & Community Relations and Bilingual Community Relations Specialist in New Jersey Division on Civil Rights' Community Relations Unit. A second-generation Latinx Hudson County native and a first-generation college graduate earning their undergraduate and graduate degrees in Criminal Justice from New Jersey City University.

In 2017, Tisha joined DCR as a Bilingual Investigator in the Enforcement Unit, served as the bilingual subject matter expert for the New Jersey Bias Investigation Access System (NJBIAS) Project that launched in November 2020, and now serves as the Statewide NJBIAS Community Liaison for the online complaint portal.

Tisha is based in Newark, and primary counties are Bergen, Hudson, Hunterdon, Passaic, Sussex and Union. Tisha leads their unit's strategic planning and programming initiatives on breastfeeding, pregnancy, gender, sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, national origin, nationality, ancestry, and religion (Islam). Tisha serves as the subject matter expert on Youth, Higher Education, Prisons and Policing, Latino/a/x, LGBTQI+, Muslim and Immigrant communities. They also serve as the DCR Youth Ambassador Program Coordinator.



Kai Durant

Kai Durant is a community relations specialist in the Community Relations Unit (CRU) at the New Jersey Division on Civil Rights. At CRU, she works to prevent acts of discrimination and bias based harassment through education and community engagement. She co-leads topics of housing, employment, disability, and the youth ambassador program. She completed her undergrad at Rutgers University with a focus Sociology and Gender Studies. Following undergrad, she completed her Master's in Social Work with a concentration on policy at Columbia University. She has experience in community outreach, advocacy, and organizing from her past work at a non-profit, community health center, and campaign.



Crystal D. Charley

MBA, CD, reproductive justice and civil rights activist, is a respected community organizer and advocate. The proud mother is also a patient advocate for Black maternal health, and the Founder of Melanin and Maternal Wellness (formerly, Melanin and Motherhood). She is a Shafia Monroe Consulting (SMC) Full Circle Doula Birth Companion, providing perinatal doula services including, prenatal, labor and delivery, and postpartum care. A graduate of the Commonsense Childbirth Institute, Crystal is also a Childbirth Educator.

Crystal is also a Senior Organizer, for Salvation and Social Justice, leading the Organization's campaigns around Black health equity, environmental, and economic justice. It is also through Salvation and Social Justice, she advocates for policies and legislation to address the tremendous disparities in Black maternal and infant health.

Crystal is a member of the Board of Directors for the Southern New Jersey Perinatal Cooperative, as well as Fair Share Housing Center. She is also the former Maternal Justice Subcommittee Co-Chair for Thrive NJ.

Grounded in her activism, Crystal, a Silver Life Member, is currently serving in her second term as the 2nd Vice-President of the NAACP New Jersey State Conference.

Her dedication, activism, and advocacy has also led to print, online, and on television features in The Philadelphia Inquirer, The Burlington County Times, the Grio, The Moorestown Sun, Front Runner New Jersey, The Trentonian, Insider NJ, Fox29 and 6ABC.

Crystal is a proud legacy, and mother member of Jack and Jill of America, Incorporated, Burlington County Chapter.



Dr. Lisa Gittens-Williams

is a graduate of Cornell University and Temple University Medical School. She completed residency in Obstetrics and Gynecology and fellowship training in Maternal Fetal Medicine at Rutgers NJ Medical School, Newark New Jersey. She is Director of Obstetrics at University Hospital, Newark, NJ. She is a Professor in the Department of Obstetrics, Gynecology and Women's Health at Rutgers NJ Medical School. She is a practicing Maternal Fetal Medicine Specialist.

She serves as chair of The Maternal Health Awareness Day Committee for ACOG (American College of Obstetrics and Gynecology) District III and Legislative chair and Vice Chair of the NJ Section of ACOG. She is the Director of Obstetrics at University Hospital, an inner-city hospital servicing an ethnically diverse patient population. In this role she serves as the Department Patient Safety Officer, leading quality improvement and safety efforts. Her focus has been on the implementation of nationally recognized perinatal safety initiatives and development of new models of patient care. She developed and implemented a Navigation program for high-risk pregnancies, The Lifestyle Centering Pregnancy program for obese and diabetic women and an Equity Birth Plan to assure attention to social determinants of health. These novel interdisciplinary programs create new models for care delivery, with a focus on pregnancy as an opportunity for long-term disease prevention, addressing racial disparities in outcomes.

She serves as trustee of the NJ Partnership for Maternal and Child Health, an advisor to The Greater Newark Health Care Coalition and the NJ Prematurity Prevention Initiative, and consultant to the State of NJ Maternity Report Card, serving to direct policy decisions and program development in maternal health.



Aarin Michelle Williams, Esq.

(she/her) is an experienced and versatile attorney who works to champion the principles of equity, justice, and opportunity, over civility or respectability. She is barred in New Jersey, New York and the Southern District of New York but has appeared in various courts around the country. She is an experienced civil rights litigator, social, racial, and reproductive justice movement lawyer and proud criminal defense attorney. Simultaneously, Aarin is the Chief of Strategic Initiatives and Enforcement with the NJ Division on Civil Rights (DCR) the state's only anti-discrimination agency. In her current role with DCR she leads a team that advances statewide policy and proactive enforcement, recently resulting in a historic multi-million dollar redlining matter with the DOJ, as well as the promulgation of the nation's first Fair Chance in Housing Act – NJ's law that prohibits housing discrimination based upon criminal record and many other initiatives.

In her immediate past position, she was a Senior Staff Attorney for National Advocates for Pregnant Women (now known as Pregnancy Justice), a national legal non-profit that advocates for, and represents, pregnant people who were charged with crimes or faced punishment related to their pregnancies. In her role she provided legal advice, developed case strategies, organized forums, and spoke about the criminalization of pregnancy, advocating to shift culture around drug policy, bodily autonomy and state-sanctioned violence, advised on various advocacy campaigns, federal and local policies and legislation and educated on the connections between carceral systems and the Black maternal health crisis. Aarin's work as a reproductive justice legal advocate brought her to the national stage in 2019 when she appeared on CNN's United Shades of America Show, hosted by W. Kamau Bell. Aarin appeared on the "Body Politics" episode which amplified the importance of the Black women created and led reproductive justice movement. Thanks in part to Aarin's explanation of the framework and her legal cases representing pregnant people around the country, the show won a 2019 Emmy Award for "Outstanding Unstructured Reality Programming".

In prior positions Aarin was a zealous trial attorney as a New Jersey State Public Defender where she was a trial strategy trainer and lead lawyer handling complex felony criminal cases, including infamous homicide cases. She has also served as an Adjunct Professor at the New Jersey Institute of Technology and Seton Hall Law School. At Seton Hall Law School she developed and co-taught the course "Incarceration and Social Inequality in the Law", a critical race theory course that highlights the vast inequities in the legal system that future lawyers should be prepared to confront and commit to remedying.

Aarin is originally from Jonesboro, Georgia and considers herself a lifelong Southerner. She is a proud graduate of Howard University and attributes much of her passion for community-building and advocacy to her alma maters. During her tenure at Rutgers School of Law-Newark she was a member of the Rutgers Law Review, Vice-President of the Association of Black Law Students (serving as the co-lead for Jazz for Justice) and served in a myriad of other leadership roles; she was also a Marsha Wenk Fellow working with the ACLU of NJ and held an internship with the NAACP Legal Defense & Educational Fund and Federal District Court Judge, the Honorable Katherine S. Hayden. Immediately after graduation Aarin served as a law clerk to the Honorable Carolyn E. Wright of the New Jersey Superior Court (Family Division).

Aarin strongly believes that her community is owed and deserving of the benefits and fruits of her education, and she works hard to ensure that it receives the same. In her community, she mentors and volunteers through several organizations. Aarin attributes her success to the opportunities provided by her proud, hardworking, no-nonsense parents, supportive and equally dynamic circle of friends and all ancestors who have led the charge towards liberation and justice.

She lives by the adage: I am exceptional without being an exception