

Persons with Disabilities and Workplace Discrimination Virtual Program

AGENDA

January 24, 2024

Moderator

Kai Durant

Community Relations Specialist Division on Civil Rights

Opening Remarks

Sundeep Iyer

Director, Division on Civil Rights

Panelists

Michael R. Brower

Legal Director/General Counsel - Disability Rights New Jersey

Akili Snead

Federal Investigator, Equal Employment Opportunity Commission

Melissa “Mel” Walker

Legal Specialist, NJ Division on Civil Rights

Questions and Answers

Closing Remarks

Tee Leonardo-Santiago,

Director of Outreach & Community Relations, Division on Civil Rights

Moderator & Panelists Bios

Sundeep Iyer *(Opening Remarks)*

Director, New Jersey Division on Civil Rights

Sundeep Iyer is the Director of the Division on Civil Rights. He previously served as Assistant Attorney General and Senior Counsel to Attorney General Matthew J. Platkin. In that capacity, he was the Attorney General's principal advisor on civil rights matters and coordinated department-wide civil rights initiatives. He also worked with the Office of the Solicitor General on appeals involving matters of constitutional law, statutory interpretation, civil rights, and criminal law.

Prior to joining the Office of the Attorney General, Iyer was a senior associate at Hogan Lovells US LLP. During his time at the firm, he served as a special attorney for the State of Minnesota in the prosecution of the four former police officers charged in connection with the death of George Floyd. He was part of the legal team that obtained a conviction of Derek Chauvin on charges of second-degree murder, third-degree murder, and second-degree manslaughter, and he briefed, argued, and won key legal motions for the State at trial.

Iyer was also part of the litigation team that obtained an injunction against President Trump's travel ban and defended that injunction before the U.S. Supreme Court. He represented federal death-row inmates in a challenge to the Trump Administration's federal lethal injection protocol. And he was one of the lead attorneys for a group of eight plaintiff organizations challenging President Trump's rescission of the Bears Ears National Monument in Utah.

Iyer previously clerked for U.S. Supreme Court Justices David H. Souter and Stephen G. Breyer, as well as for then-Judge Brett M. Kavanaugh on the U.S. Court of Appeals for the D.C. Circuit. He received his A.B. from Harvard College and J.D. from Yale Law School. Prior to graduating law school, Sundeep was the Principal Quantitative Analyst at the Brennan Center for Justice at NYU School of Law, where he directed statistical research on voting rights, campaign finance, and redistricting issues.

Kai Durant *(Moderator)*

Community Relations Specialist, New Jersey Division on Civil Rights

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.

Michael R. Brower *(Panelist)*

Legal Director/General Counsel - Disability Rights New Jersey

Michael Brower serves as the Legal Director at Disability Rights NJ, the private non-profit agency designated as the Protection and Advocacy system for people with disabilities in the state of New Jersey. He has worked as an attorney there since 2016, and has represented clients and worked on systemic issues affecting individuals with I/DD, brain injuries, physical disabilities, and mental health conditions. Before joining Disability Rights NJ, Michael represented people struggling with medical and consumer debt in NJ and PA. Michael received an undergraduate degree in history from The College of New Jersey in 2009 and his law degree from Rutgers Law School in Camden in 2012.

Akili Snead *(Panelist)*

Federal Investigator, Equal Employment Opportunity Commission

Akili Snead is a Federal Investigator who works for the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC). Akili is responsible for investigating and remedying unlawful employment discrimination in the workplace by enforcing Federal Employment Laws that prohibit employment discrimination. He is also responsible for conducting and participating in outreach events for college students, the general public, and employers on behalf of the EEOC. Lastly, he currently serves as a mentor for federal staff. Akili has experience conducting training on the ADA, ADEA, EPA, Title VII and other federal laws. He graduated from Rowan University with a bachelor's degree in political science and a minor in Interpersonal communications. He has worked for the Department of Justice Federal Bureau of Prisons and the Department of Veterans Affairs. Prior to his career in the federal government, Akili served in the US Army for four years as a military Police Officer. After being honorably discharged from the US Army, Akili then served six years with the US Air Force as an Aircraft Armament Systems Airmen. He has thirteen years of law enforcement experience ranging from criminal to civil matters.

Melissa “Mel” Walker *(Panelist)*

Legal Specialist, New Jersey Division on Civil Rights

Mel Walker (she/her) is a legal specialist at Division on Civil Rights in the Policy Unit. She leads in discrimination issues involving race, disability, and health equity, related to policy. It's common for Mel to be involved with other topic areas, such as housing, due to how her topics intersect with everything else. Mel graduated from Seton Hall Law in 2020; during her last year, she served as Student Bar Association President and participated in the Health Law Clinic. Mel was a law clerk for the Honorable Sharifa R. Salaam, New Jersey Superior Court, Essex County, where she worked on dockets in the civil, criminal, and family divisions. During law school, Mel interned at multiple non-profits, such as the New York Environmental Law Project, where she worked on environmental justice issues in NYCHA housing, and the Greater Newark Health Care Coalition, where she investigated the treatment of homeless diabetics and the sources of lead poisoning in youth and adults. Before law school, Mel worked in marketing as a project manager. She was a 2022 Affirmative Leader Fellow with the Public Rights Project. Ironically, her marketing background comes in handy more often than her legal background. After a long day of work, Mel has a cup of tea and hangs out with her wonderful cat, Grim.

Tee Leonardo-Santiago *(Closing Remarks)*

Director of Outreach & Community Relations, New Jersey Division on Civil Rights

Tisha “Tee” Leonardo-Santiago (she/they) holds the proud distinction of being the first Latinx Director of Outreach and Community Relations at the New Jersey Division on Civil Rights (DCR), where they provide strategic oversight and implementation of the Community Relations Unit’s statewide outreach and programming to support and uplift the Division’s initiatives, social media presence, and crisis response efforts to prevent and eliminate discrimination and bias in the Garden State. Tee’s team is also a crisis response unit following major civil rights incidents. As a community mediator, they engage in complex mediation, restorative justice practices, and community dialogue with a trauma-informed care lens. In recognition of the Unit’s exceptional outreach and Tee’s leadership, in 2023, Attorney General Platkin presented the Community Relations Unit the “Excellence in Community Outreach” Award and Tee the “Excellence for Exceptional Service Award.”

Before joining the Community Relations Unit, Tee began her career at the Division as a Bilingual Investigator in the Enforcement Unit, investigating employment and place of public accommodation cases while assisting with Division outreach. They served as the bilingual subject matter expert in developing and implementing the online complaint portal, the New Jersey Bias Investigation Access System (NJBIAS), launched in November 2020. Before joining DCR, Tee was the first Bilingual General Adjuster for one of the oldest insurance adjustment firms in the country, where they investigated commercial fire & theft, personal lines, fine arts & fidelity claims. Tee is a second-generation Latinx from Hudson County and a first-generation college graduate receiving their undergraduate and graduate degrees in Criminal Justice from New Jersey City University.