

New York State Office of Mental Health Celebrates Black History Month!

Canuteson, Matthew (OMH) <Matthew.Canuteson@OMH.NY.GOV>

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To: CC-DISCUSSION@LISTSERV.OMH.NY.GOV <CC-DISCUSSION@LISTSERV.OMH.NY.GOV>



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As we celebrate Black History Month, the New York State Office of Mental Health (OMH) honors and recognizes the remarkable contributions and commitment from the Black community to the mental health field. OMH acknowledges the unique challenges Black community members face and reaffirms the Agency's commitment to ensuring these communities have equal access to quality mental health services and support systems. We are committed to implementing strategies and efforts to address long-standing and unjust disparities Black, Indigenous and people of color face. With these focused efforts, OMH engages in many activities and remains focused on promoting racial equity and driving system-wide progressive change.

Following the additional attention to race precipitated by George Floyd's murder, the Multicultural Advisory Committee encouraged the OMH to collaborate with the Nathan Kline Institute's Center for Research on Cultural and Structural Equity in Behavioral Health to conduct an Agency-wide review of structural racism throughout the entire Agency. This comprehensive review is intended to identify systemic and executive policies, procedures and practices that may unintentionally contribute to racial inequities in New York's mental health system.

Leading the way on racial inclusivity, OMH is directing its attention on diversifying the mental health system's workforce and recognizes how critical it is to have a behavioral health workforce reflecting New York State's racial and cultural populations. These efforts include leveraging formal partnerships with the State University of New York and the New York City-based City University of New York to develop diversity pipeline programs in professional disciplines, which historically lack Black and people of color representation. These programs are intended to provide direct support to diverse students and help alleviate barriers to degree completion.

In keeping with its commitment to inclusivity, OMH continues its information sharing and public messaging around issues, including racial justice and equity. These include hosting webinars that are focused on organizational change for greater equity, diversity and inclusion. Additionally, the Agency continues to create materials and resources supporting diverse communities and highlights the unique challenges these communities face, such as racism and the impact of racism on mental health. These resources can be accessed on OMH's Office of Diversity and Inclusion's [webpage](#).

We are aware that although we are making strides to address the disparities and injustices Black and people of color face, there is still much more work to be done. OMH remains committed to focus on racial justice and equity and holding the systems accountable for progressive and informed change.

As we come to the end of commemorating this year's Black History Month, OMH wishes to highlight some of the many leaders across the Agency (Dr. Crystal Fuller Lewis, Shannon Cornwall, Kanika Jefferies, and Imari Wilson) who demonstrate an unwavering commitment and dedication to upholding the Agency's mission to promote the

mental wellness of all New Yorkers. These individuals make amazing contributions to mental health care and demonstrate the importance of holding the system accountable for making progressive change.



Dr. Crystal Fuller Lewis

In 2015, Dr. Lewis was appointed by the NYS Office of Mental Health as the Division Head of Social Solutions & Services Research, at the Nathan S. Kline Institute for Psychiatric Research. Dr. Lewis also directs the *Center for Research on Cultural & Structural Equity in Behavioral Health (CCASE)*, one of two Centers of Excellence funded by the NYS Office of Mental Health and dedicated to tackling racial disparities in services access and engagement. As an epidemiologist, Dr. Lewis's research has been rooted in understanding and solving the persistent problem of racial disparities that exist across several health outcomes. When Dr. Lewis joined NKI, she was also appointed as an Associate Professor at NYU Grossman School of Medicine, Department of Psychiatry. During this time, and previously during her tenure at Columbia University, she led an NIH funded research portfolio focused on improving the health of Black and Latinx communities, specifically those who are heavily

burdened with substance use, mental illness, and related adverse social conditions. Prior to the murder of Mr. George Floyd, recognition and understanding of racism as a social determinant of health was absent in research and practice, including the lack of awareness of how structural racism is rooted within the false assumption of white superiority. Today, Dr. Lewis has been sought out to give numerous webinars, trainings, and invited speaker engagements – statewide and nationally – to discuss how structural racism impacts individual and community health. This work has largely informed the novel development and evaluation of Cultural & Structural Humility training that aims to reduce implicit and explicit bias through self-awareness and humility.

Dr. Lewis believes that recognition and remembrance of Black historical moments will always be appreciated during the month of February; however, it is her dream that Black history be given its rightful place within American history, each, and every month of the year, as there is no American history without Black history.

Shannon Cornwall

Shannon joined OMH in 2019 as the Equal Opportunity Specialist, responsible for coordinating the Agency's workforce diversity and inclusion efforts. In this role, Shannon supports OMH's facilities, field offices and central office by ensuring there is focused attention on activities that promote diverse and inclusive work environments. Additionally, Shannon plays an integral role in overseeing the operation of OMH's facility Cultural Competence Diversity and Respect Committees, which review policies, programs, procedures and other activities aimed at addressing the reduction of disparities.

Shannon grew up in Queens, NY and started her career journey working in Harlem, NY. Prior to coming to OMH, Shannon worked with community-based and non-profit organizations for over 18 years. Shannon worked to ensure that underrepresented communities had not only equal access to housing, employment, and education, but were able to succeed when granted access.



Shannon's passion, experience, and education over the past 18 years in promoting and ensuring equal opportunity, diversity, and inclusion, remain relevant in all of her educational, training and employment opportunities. In addition, Shannon has extensive experience in employment training programs that provide an opportunity for high school students and adults learners to gain work experience and obtain competitive employment. Shannon earned her master's degree in Community Economic Development at Empire State University after raising 4 children - showing her that you can accomplish anything if you put your mind to it. Shannon currently sits on the Juvenile Accountably Board (JCAB), which is a program at the Albany County

Probation Department seeking to help juveniles understand the impact crime has on the community and to allow them an opportunity to repair the harm that was caused.

What Black History means to Shannon is self-reflection, core values, honesty and being comfortable with being uncomfortable. Shannon also credits the following quote with driving her passion for this work.

"You know, a lot of people don't love themselves. And they go through life with deep and haunting emotional conflicts. So the length of life means that you must love yourself. And you know what loving yourself also means? It means that you've got to accept yourself." - Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.



Kanika Jefferies

Ms. Jefferies joined New York State's Public Management Program in 2007, a Governor's Office program which offers mid-level management opportunities to graduate level professionals. After the program's completion, Ms. Jefferies remained in state service to support staffing efforts at Manhattan/Kirby Forensic Psychiatric Center during the 2008 economic crisis. Since then, she was always eager to assume progressively responsible leadership roles, such as managing revenue contracts, leading a trauma response team, supervising services, and taking a lead in survey readiness activities. Her zeal and experience has led to several appointments including DDPC1, DDPC2 and ED. At the time of her current appointment, Ms. Jefferies was identified as the youngest Executive Director to be appointed within the NYS Office of Mental Health system. Six years later, she continues to find joy in the transformational work that happens each day at New York City Children's Center.

Ms. Jefferies holds a Master's Degree in Public Administration from CUNY

Baruch College and a Master's Degree in Social Work from Fordham University- Lincoln Center. Since joining New York State Service Ms. Jefferies has also earned a Graduate Certificate in Management Studies from Cornell University and is a Lean Six Sigma Black Belt, SUNY University at Buffalo. She is an alumni of the prestigious National Urban Fellows Program, an Executives on Campus Mentor at CUNY and an active member of several professional organizations. Ms. Jefferies' greatest joy has been experiencing the world with her life partner of twenty-five years and raising their two active teenagers in Queens, New York.

Celebrating Black History:

"A people without the knowledge of their past history, origin and culture is like a tree without roots." - Marcus Garvey



Imari Wilson

Imari is a Youth Peer Engagement Specialist for the New York State System of Care Pilot - Division of Integrated Community Services for Children & Families. Imari has dedicated his time to advocating for youth and individuals with lived experience through education and self-advocacy. His work as a credentialed Youth Peer Advocate afforded opportunities to support youth and families receiving CFTSS services. Utilizing his own lived experience of navigating mental health and medical services, Imari intended to inspire hope through the individualized wellness and recovery goals of young people. Inspiring hope within the Child serving system was not just a role but evolved into his passion for service as he saw the outcomes of actively listening to- and working with youth.

Imari would go on to be a Regional Youth Partner for 16 counties representing the Hudson River Region, tasked with providing training and technical assistance to family serving agencies on youth engagement youth guided practices, and youth peer services. Presently, Imari brings his professional and personal lived experiences to provider training, coaching, and technical assistance to county family serving agencies, community providers, and peers. Ensuring family- and youth-driven practices are integrated across all services within support that is consistent with the goals of Systems of Care Framework.

What Black History Month Means to Imari:

Black History Month is a specified time, though not the only time, of year to celebrate individuals within the Black community in the past and present. For Imari, who is transgender and a child of an immigrant, it is a time to highlight members who are doing impactful work locally, statewide, and nationally to enhance representation. Seeing Black leaders represented and celebrated, is impactful work for the future leaders of tomorrow!

Matthew Canuteson

Pronouns: He, Him, His

Diversity and Inclusion Officer

Office of Diversity and Inclusion

New York State Office of Mental Health

44 Holland Ave 2nd Floor

Albany, NY 12229

518-473-4548

matthew.canuteson@omh.ny.gov

www.omh.ny.gov

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