



# Beyond the Binary: Protecting LGBTQ+ Health, Rights & Representation in a Shifting Political Landscape

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## Featured Panelist



### Alphonso David

**Alphonso David** is a civil rights attorney, executive, and educator. Born in Maryland and raised in Liberia, he and his family sought asylum in the U.S. after a 1980 coup. He holds degrees from the University of Maryland and Temple University School of Law, where he was recognized for trial advocacy.

David began his career as a federal judicial clerk and later held senior roles in public service, including Deputy Commissioner for Human Rights, Special Deputy Attorney General for Civil Rights, and Counsel to the Governor of New York. He helped shape legislation on marriage equality, paid family leave, criminal justice, and economic inclusion.

In the not-for-profit sector, David served from 2003 to 2007 as a staff attorney at Lambda Legal, litigating civil rights cases involving marriage, parenting, school discrimination, and healthcare access for LGBTQ individuals and those living with HIV. He was part of the legal team in *Hernandez v. Robles*, a key New York marriage equality case. From 2019 to 2021, he served as President of the Human Rights

Campaign—the first Black person in the role—where he led the organization through the COVID-19 crisis, secured major funding, and launched initiatives on transgender justice, LGBTQ litigation, and HIV and health equity. Under his leadership, HRC established a \$3.2 million partnership with Gilead Sciences to address HIV disparities in Black, Latino, and transgender communities.

In the private sector, David has held legal and executive roles, including at Blank Rome LLP and in healthcare equity ventures. He is currently President and CEO of the Global Black Economic Forum, advancing economic opportunity for marginalized communities.

He also teaches constitutional and family law, with past appointments at Fordham and Cardozo Law Schools.

## Panelists



### **Cynthia L. Benson, DO, FACEP, MPH, MBA**

**Cynthia L. Benson, DO, FACEP, MPH, MBA**, is an accomplished physician-leader and educator with over 15 years of frontline experience in emergency medicine and hospital quality improvement. She is the Interim Medical Director and Director of Quality for the Emergency Department at the University Hospital at Downstate, where she leads strategic initiatives to improve patient outcomes, clinical efficiency, and regulatory compliance.

Dr. Benson is board-certified in Emergency Medicine and holds dual master's degrees in Public Health and Business Administration. Her administrative career has spanned prestigious healthcare systems, including Northwell Health, Atlantic Health System, and SUNY Downstate. She has held progressive leadership roles, from clinical director to assistant medical director, guiding hospital-wide efforts in sepsis management, stroke certification, electronic medical record rollouts, and patient safety culture transformation.

A dedicated educator, Dr. Benson serves as an Assistant Clinical Professor of Emergency Medicine, where she actively teaches residents, physician assistants, and medical students. She is recognized for engaging lectures on topics ranging from quality improvement to financial wellness for medical trainees. Her academic interests extend to clinical decision-making and the intersection of neuroscience and emergency care, with publications in *Frontiers in Human Neuroscience* and the *Journal of Emergency Medicine*.

Dr. Benson completed her medical training at Nova Southeastern University and her emergency

medicine residency at SUNY Downstate/King's County Hospital Center, where she served as Chief Resident. She later completed an Administrative Fellowship in Emergency Medicine at Northwell Health. Her business acumen is based on an Executive MBA from Wagner College, where she received the Leadership Excellence Award.

Known for fostering interdisciplinary collaboration, Dr. Benson has redesigned patient flow systems, streamlined peer review mechanisms, and implemented hospital-wide protocols to support evidence-based medicine. She brings a unique blend of clinical, operational, and academic expertise. She is deeply committed to improving care delivery in complex urban hospital settings.

Outside of clinical work, she is a speaker and faculty advisor. She has received multiple honors for her leadership and scholarship. Dr. Benson resides in New York City and continues to shape the future of emergency medicine through education, innovation, and service.



### **Elka Jacobson-Dickman, M.D.**

**Elka Jacobson-Dickman, M.D.**, always knew she would practice medicine. Raised in a family of physicians, she saw early on that medicine was a way of life. As a child, she watched her father welcome trainees into their home. She often accompanied him on patient visits, learning that care and community are inseparable. These experiences sparked a lifelong commitment to the field.

She found her professional home in pediatric endocrinology. She was drawn to its intricate biology and the lasting relationships it allows with patients and families. After earning her Bachelor of Science from McGill University and her medical

degree from Albert Einstein College of Medicine, she completed her pediatrics residency at the Children's Hospital at Montefiore and a fellowship in pediatric endocrinology at Harvard Medical School, Massachusetts General Hospital.

Dr. Jacobson-Dickman has held leadership roles at Downstate Health Sciences University and Maimonides Medical Center, including Director of the Pediatric Endocrinology Fellowship Program and Director of Faculty Development. She is Downstate's Associate Dean for Clinical Medicine, overseeing the Integrated Pathways Curriculum's Core and Advanced Clinical Medicine phases. Her passion for academic medicine has led her to champion student-faculty collaboration, curricular innovation, and reflective practice.

In addition to her curriculum oversight responsibilities in the College of Medicine, Dr. Jacobson-Dickman is the proud Co-Director of the LGBTQIA+ Para-Curricular Pathway.

Dr. Jacobson-Dickman's research focuses on the genetics of puberty, medical education, and resident-as-teacher development. She serves on multiple institutional committees devoted to enriching the learning environment, advancing public health education, and fostering faculty growth.



## **Suzanne Rappaport, OTD, OTR/L**

**Suzanne Rappaport, OTD, OTR/L** is an occupational therapist, educator, and advocate whose work bridges the arts, health, and social justice. She began her career in the visual arts with a BFA in Painting and Photography from Syracuse University. After college, she discovered that performing in the circus was a way of creating art in a physical and visual

sense, eventually using movement to foster physical and emotional well-being.

This path inspired her transition into occupational therapy. She earned her Master of Science and Occupational Therapy Doctorate (OTD) from Tufts University, where she deepened her focus on holistic, inclusive, and evidence-based care.

Dr. Rappaport is the PP-OTD Program Coordinator and Assistant Professor in the Occupational Therapy Program at the School of Health Professions. She specializes in pediatric mental health and supports adolescents and young adults with autism and intellectual disabilities. She brings a creative, multidisciplinary approach to inclusive care and education. She contributes to adaptive sports training and community outreach for individuals experiencing homelessness.

An advocate for health equity, she has led workshops on best practices for transgender and gender non-conforming clients and mentors research in this area, emphasizing the importance of centering lived experiences in representation.

A belief in the transformative power of occupation and community drives her work. She encourages critical reflection and action toward greater justice in health care and society through teaching, mentorship, and public scholarship, including her podcast [OT JEDI](#).



## **Christopher Román, Ph.D.**

**Christopher Román, Ph.D.**, is Chair of the Department of Cell Biology and Associate Professor of Cell Biology and Medicine at Downstate. Dr. Roman is an internationally respected immunologist who has spent nearly four decades exploring

how the immune system distinguishes between harmful invaders and the body's tissues. His research focuses on the genetic and molecular mechanisms that regulate B lymphocyte development and immune tolerance—critical processes in preventing autoimmune diseases like lupus.

Dr. Román earned his undergraduate degree in biochemistry from Harvard and a Ph.D. in Biological Chemistry from UCLA. He completed postdoctoral fellowships at Rockefeller University and MIT, where he began identifying transcription factors and gene pathways that direct immune cell function. His recent work has revealed how enzymes like sphingomyelin synthase two and transcription factors such as Mitf, TFE3, and TFEB eliminate self-reactive B cells in germinal centers, helping maintain immune balance.

A passionate educator and mentor, Dr. Román has received numerous honors for his teaching and service, including the SUNY Chancellor's Award for Excellence in Teaching, the Outstanding Educator in the Foundations of Medicine Award, the Excellence in Mentoring Award from SUNY Downstate's Office of Diversity in Education and Research, and the LGBTQ+ Advocacy Award. Dr. Román is a member of the prestigious **Henry Kunkel Society**, which recognizes excellence in human immunology.

community health promotion. He currently serves as Chair and Assistant Professor of the Occupational Therapy Program in the School of Health Professions.

Dr. Nuwere is a seasoned clinician and a dynamic leader in higher education, dedicated to the rigorous preparation of the future of occupational therapists. He champions active learning and inclusive pedagogy, ensuring students are well-equipped to provide client-centered care across multicultural and community-based environments.

His scholarly pursuits involve a critical examination of teaching and learning methodologies in occupational therapy education. Additionally, he investigates how social determinants of health contribute to barriers to participation, with a particular emphasis promoting healthy aging and fostering health and well-being for older adults.

Driven by his belief in occupational therapy's transformative power, Dr. Nuwere advocates for accessible, meaningful care that empowers individuals to live fuller, healthier lives.

## Moderator



### **Efekona Nuwere, Ed.D, MPH, OTR/L**

**Efekona Nuwere, Ed.D, MPH, OTR/L.**, is a licensed occupational therapist with clinical experience spanning diverse practice areas including medical/surgical rehabilitation, assistive technology, and