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## Speaker Biographies

### **Keynote Address: *Creating & Delivering an Inclusive Workplace***

**Bassam Awadalla**, Consumer Banking Region Executive, Senior Vice President - PA, SNJ & DE/Northeast Region, *Bank of America*

Bassam Awadalla is region executive of Consumer & Small Business banking at Bank of America. Awadalla leads a team responsible for delivering 1.5 million households a full range of financial products and services, delivered with unmatched convenience and exceptional client experience.

Awadalla leads Bank of America's consumer network in the Pennsylvania, Southern New Jersey and Delaware markets, consisting of 124 financial centers and 700 employees and is responsible for delivering the company's strong results through integration across all consumer, preferred and small business.

Awadalla has held a number of leader roles in his 11 years at Bank of America, including Area Executive responsible for managing client experience, risk and revenue growth within the Bank's financial centers throughout Pennsylvania, South New Jersey and Delaware. He currently serves on the Board of Directors of both the Junior Achievement of Delaware and Philabundance; two non-profit organizations located in the Philadelphia Metro area and is the executive sponsor of the Philadelphia Black Professional Group chapter.

He earned a Bachelor's degree in Political Science from the American University in Cairo.

**Liana Harris, Delaware Market and Northeast Division Financial Centers Human Resources Manager, Senior Vice President, Bank of America**

Liana Harris is the Human Resources Manager for the Northeast Division with Consumer Banking & Merrill Edge supporting over 6,500 employees. In her prior role as the Site HR Manager for the Deerfield Site in Newark, Delaware, Liana supported various leaders across multiple lines of business. She provided proactive coaching, consultation and direction to management in areas of employee relations, employee engagement, diversity inclusion, performance management, recruitment, and career mobility.

Liana is currently the Delaware Market HR partner for Chip Rossi – Delaware Market President and Risk Executive. As a Market HR Manager, she is a strategic business partner delivering Market-focused HR activities in support of delivering ‘One team’ locally.

Liana began her career in 1994 in Corporate Banking in New York. Throughout the years she’s held various leadership roles in Commercial Real Estate, Treasury Management, US Trust, Consumer Banking & Investments, and GWIM Operations.

Liana is also involved with the Delaware Chapter of LEAD (Leadership, Education and Advocacy) for Women since 2014. She has held various leadership positions. Liana currently Co-Chairs the Work Life Balance Sub-committee with a focus on enhancing members overall health and wellness through sharing resources and hosting seminars.

She currently resides in Delaware with her husband, where she enjoys traveling and spending quality time with her family.

## ***Panel 1: The Workplace Evolution – Expanding the Definition of Inclusivity***

### **MODERATOR:**

**Nyeema C. Watson, Ph.D., Associate Chancellor for Civic Engagement, Rutgers University – Camden**

Dr. Nyeema C. Watson is the associate chancellor for civic engagement at Rutgers University–Camden, where she oversees efforts to connect the resources of the university with communities in Camden and across southern New Jersey.

The office focuses on engaged civic learning, volunteerism and service, community-based research, and integrated partnerships focused on addressing local issues. Under her leadership in this area, Rutgers University–Camden has become nationally recognized as a leader in the field of civic engagement by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching with the university receiving the Community Engagement Classification, as well as honors from the Washington Center and New York Life Foundation, and the President’s Higher Education Community Service Honor Roll.

Watson is an experienced leader in civic and community engagement, higher education administration, anchor institution partnerships, student success initiatives, policy and program development, and research on issues relating to minority children and youth who live in high poverty areas. She speaks across the country on the role of urban higher education institutions as anchor institutions, especially as it relates to forging partnerships with K-12 institutions on how to create educational pipelines for underrepresented youth to higher education. She is committed to diversity, access and inclusion, and supporting individuals, communities, and institutions working in partnership to achieve shared goals for positive transformation.

During 2016-17, the [Office of Civic Engagement](#) led efforts that contributed more than 432,000 hours of community service in and around the city of Camden, impacting the lives of nearly 11,000 Camden residents. More than half of the student population of Rutgers–Camden participates in civic engagement as part of a credit-bearing academic experience with most students contributing 20 hours or more to service. Two major programs under her direction include Rutgers Future Scholars, a pre-college program aimed at increasing the number of students from Camden city schools who attend and graduate from college by providing tuition scholarships to students who are admitted to Rutgers, and the Rutgers Camden Schools Partnership.

Through [Rutgers Future Scholars](#), the university supports 250 students in grades 8 through 12 with year-round academic, social, and personal support to assist in their transition to college. Since its inception, the program has sent more than 130 Camden students to college at Rutgers University and beyond. The [Rutgers Camden Schools Partnership](#) serves more than 400 students in grades 4 through 8, as well as their families, in schools in the East and North Camden neighborhoods using a university- assisted community schools approach. Working in collaboration with the school leadership, staff, families, and community organizations, the program seeks to increase student achievement by providing an integrated system of partnerships that promote academic success, support positive social and emotional development, and engage families and community members in an effort to strengthen the Camden neighborhoods.

Watson began her career as a career counselor at the University of Pennsylvania and then shifted her focus to education policy at the New Jersey Department of Education. At the Department of Education, she was responsible for managing state and federal grants, research, and policy analysis. She was the program officer for the New Jersey 21st Century Community Learning Centers Program, at the time a \$12.75 million program that provided grants to support expanded academic enrichment opportunities during out-of-school time hours for children attending low-performing schools.

In 2004, she joined Rutgers–Camden as associate director of the Center for Children and Childhood Studies. She was named assistant chancellor for civic engagement in 2015 and promoted to associate chancellor for civic engagement in 2016.

In 2012, Watson was one of 15 fellows selected nationwide for the inaugural White-Riley-Peterson Policy Fellowship. This opportunity allowed her to study afterschool and expanded learning policy and work in partnership with the New Jersey Statewide Afterschool Network, funded by the C.S. Mott Foundation, to develop a state-level policy plan focused on increasing the quality of school based out-of-school time programs in New Jersey.

Watson serves on the boards of several not-for-profit organizations, including the Center for Family Services, a nonprofit human service agency dedicated to improving the lives of children and families in southern New Jersey. She served on the Camden City Public Schools Board of Education from 2006-09, a position that she was appointed to by Acting Governor Richard Codey and then re-appointed to by Governor Jon Corzine. While on the board, Watson was elected as vice president and served as the chair the curriculum committee. Her commitment to Camden and serving others has been honored by the United Way of Greater Philadelphia and Southern New Jersey, Kappa Alpha Psi Fraternity Inc., the *Anointed News Journal*, and others.

Watson received her bachelor of arts in Afro-American studies and psychology from Rutgers University–Camden, her master's in psychological services from the University of Pennsylvania's Graduate School of Education, and her Ph.D. in childhood studies from Rutgers University–Camden, where her research focused on images and representation of African American children.

### **Shawn Abner-Purnell, Director, Organizational Development & Diversity/Inclusion, South Jersey Industries**

Shawn uses her experience in Organizational Development, Diversity/ Inclusion and Talent Management to build a high performing culture, drive culture change and create an inclusive environment where employees feel empowered to bring their whole selves to work. She collaborates with leaders to drive advocacy and adoption of business strategies that address diversity gaps in all areas of the company.

Shawn spent the majority of her career in the insurance industry leading teams whose mission was to drive organizational performance, develop leaders and build a winning culture. In her current role, she helps build organizational capabilities in its workforce through talent development solutions, culture transformation initiatives and building strategies to create a culture of inclusion.

Shawn grew up in Philadelphia and now resides in Glassboro, NJ with her husband and three children.

### **Justin Lane, Manager, Large Group Retention, AmeriHealth New Jersey**

Justin Lane is Manager of Sales for AmeriHealth New Jersey. Since joining the company nearly a decade ago, Justin has been instrumental in fostering meaningful relationships with both brokers and customers enabling him to effectively manage some of the company's largest and most complex accounts. He leads a team exclusively focused on retaining large group customers in the fully insured market.

As co-chair of AmeriHealth New Jersey's Diversity and Inclusion Council, Justin plays an integral role in helping cultivate a welcoming and inclusive work environment within the company.

Justin also sits on the board of the Gateway Regional Chamber of Commerce. In 2017, he was named a 20 Under 40 by *South Jersey Biz*. He holds a B.S. in political science from Rutgers University. Justin has a 16-month old daughter and resides in East Windsor, New Jersey.

**Joseph Renga, President, New Jersey LGBT Chamber of Commerce**

Joseph Renga is the current, serving President and a 5-year board member of the New Jersey LGBT Chamber of Commerce, the only LGBT chamber of commerce in the Garden State, an affiliate of the National Gay and Lesbian Chamber of Commerce, based in Washington DC. He also served for 10 years as a board member, president (2 years) and Events Committee Chair (8 years) for the nation's oldest and largest LGBT business networking organization, Out Professionals, based in NYC.

Additionally, he represents the LGBT chamber and business community as a member of the New Jersey Chamber Alliance group, a consortium of New Jersey based Chambers of Commerce, who advocate for the sustainability of small businesses around the state, which was formed as a response to the Covid-19 pandemic.

Joseph is the founder and owner of JFR Telecom Consulting, a sales, consulting and telecommunications management firm, with 35 years of experience in the telecom industry, specializing in the installation & support, project management and day-to-day management of voice and data services for all types of commercial end-users, with a specialization in non-profit organizations and government accounts.

**Clair Rohrer, M.Ed., Senior Vice President, Community Services for Adults, Bancroft**

Clair Rohrer is the Sr Vice President of Adult Service at Bancroft, a leading non-profit provider of services to people with developmental disabilities and neurological challenges. She has worked with individuals who have developmental disabilities since 1981, joined Bancroft in 1988 and has been an executive team member since 2010. Clair has oversight of Bancroft's New Jersey community programs for adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities including over fifty community residential group homes and apartment programs, adult day programs and adult employment services, and the Judith B. Flicker Residences serving older adults. Clair earned her Master of Arts in education, and a Bachelor of Science degree in psychology from LaSalle University.

***Panel 2: Ally, Accomplice, Advocate: The Language of Activism***

**MODERATOR:**

**Monika Williams Shealey, Ph.D., Division of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion; Senior Vice President, Rowan University**

Dr. Monika Williams Shealey received her B.S. and M.A. from the University of South Florida, Ed.S. from the University of Miami, and Ph.D. in Education from the University of Central Florida. Dr. Shealey has held academic appointments at the University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee, Florida International University in Miami, and the University of Missouri at Kansas City. Dr. Shealey joined Rowan in 2013 as the Dean of the College of Education and in 2019 she was tapped by President Houshmand to serve as the Inaugural Senior Vice President for Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion and lead the new Division of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion. The Division was the first of its kind in the region and will be a model for systemic change in higher education that results in equitable outcomes for students, faculty and staff. Dr. Shealey's research has focused on examining the experiences of traditionally marginalized groups in special education and Black women in teacher education and leadership. Dr. Shealey is currently a member of the Executive Committee of the Board of Directors for the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education and the Board of Trustees for the Center for Family Services and the Friends School at Mullica Hill. She is also the President of the National Association of Holmes Scholars Alumni.

**Peggy Verdi, Vice President, Human Resources and Administration, Subaru of America, Inc.**

Peggy Verdi is the Chief Human Resources Officer with experience in overseeing all aspects of human resources and corporate facilities & services, its practices, and operations in order to meet the needs of the constantly evolving business.

Peggy has led the HR function in building upon the business's current people programs and service delivery strategies, enhancing organizational decision-making and approaches for securing growth on a business-wide scale. She is an active member of the Executive Committee as well as a key executive partner and coach tasked with facilitating strategic planning and initiatives, change management, and organizational design.

Peggy has extensive, diverse experience with a demonstrated record of success in driving aggressive business objectives by building strategic partnerships and trusted relationships with senior business leaders. Proven strengths and success in building and leading large global Human Resources teams to achieve sustainable people solutions and drive transformational change.

Previously, Peggy was the Chief Human Resources Officer at Bayada Home Health Care. Peggy has a Masters degree in HR Management from Rutgers University – New Brunswick.

**Robin A. Walton, Vice President for Community and Government Affairs, Thomas Edison State University; Vice Chair, Special Events & Marketing, CCSNJ**

Robin Walton is the Vice President for Community and Government Affairs at Thomas Edison State University. In this capacity, she manages the University's relationships with federal, state and local governments, regulatory agencies, key policymakers and community stakeholders.

Ms. Walton develops Thomas Edison State University's annual legislative agenda and works with key personnel to ensure that the University's legislative priorities receive attention on the federal and state level. Ms. Walton represents Thomas Edison State University in dealings with community stakeholders in the University's regional area. She works to ensure that Thomas Edison State University's local projects and priorities complement the priorities of local government. Furthermore, the division of Community and Government Affairs, under her direction, enhances Thomas Edison State University's image and reputation through effective community outreach.

Prior to working at Thomas Edison State University, Ms. Walton was the Community Relations Coordinator at Capital Health, Confidential Assistant to the Chief of Staff and Senior Policy Advisor to the Commissioner at the New Jersey Department of Health and Senior Services under Former Governor James E. McGreevey, Policy Analyst at the National Council for Alcoholism and Drug Dependence of New Jersey and Research Associate at Princeton Public Affairs Group.

Currently, Ms. Walton serves on the Executive Committee for the Board of Directors and is Vice Chair of the Special Events and Marketing Committee for the Chamber of Commerce of Southern New Jersey, the Policy Committee for Executive Women of New Jersey and on the Board of Trustees and Finance Committee for Robert Wood Johnson University Hospital – Hamilton, a RWJBarnabas affiliate. She also serves on the Community Advisory Board for the Trenton Health Team. Previously, Ms. Walton served on the Board of Trustees for the New Jersey Hospital Association. She also served as Chair for the Board of Trustees for Children's Specialized Hospital. Ms. Walton served three terms as an appointed public university task force representative for the National Task Force for Higher Education Government Relations. She served as the Institutional Representative to NJ ACE Women's Network for Thomas Edison State University and in 2012, she began a local chapter at the University. She was appointed in 2005 by the New Jersey Senate to the Governor's Advisory Council on Adolescent Pregnancy Prevention and in 2012, to the Governor's Multiple Sclerosis (MS) Task Force. Ms. Walton also served on the Executive Committee of the Board of Trustees for Trenton Public Education Foundation and the inaugural Policy Committee for Greater Mercer Public Health Partnership. She served on education transition committee for the current mayors of both the City of Trenton and Hamilton Township. Ms. Walton is very active in her church and serves as Chair of the Pastor's Aide Auxiliary, Assistant Youth Sunday School teacher, Chair of Vacation Bible School and Program Coordinator to the Youth outreach, Kids are People Too. Ms. Walton also recently co- led a successful mentoring series for young adults in her church, which focused on realistic goal setting.

Ms. Walton received the Salute to the Policy Makers Award by the Executive Women of New Jersey (EWNJ) in 2012. In 2016, she received the prestigious honor of NJBIZ's Top 40 under 40 in NJ. In 2018, Ms. Walton was selected for the Maria Barnaby Greenwald Empowerment Award, as result of her professional and personal work to assist vulnerable populations through the State of New Jersey. In 2019, she was an honoree for the Princeton YWCA Tribute to Women Awards, selected by NJBIZ as one of the Best 50 Women in Business and as the recipient of the Marvin J. "Swede" Johnson Achievement Award for her advocacy work on behalf of adult learners in higher education. Ms. Walton is also the National Association of 100 Black Women of Southern New Jersey's recipient of the 2020 Trailblazer Award.

Ms. Walton earned her Masters of Science in Management and Graduate Certificate in Organizational Management and Leadership from Thomas Edison State University. She earned a B.A. in Political Science and an International Certificate in German from Douglass College, Rutgers, and The State University of New Jersey. Ms. Walton was a 2018 graduate of the Public Affairs Council's Institute and a 2015 Harvard Kennedy School Emerging Leader Program participant. She is a 2008 HERS Wellesley Fellow, a 2006 Young Business Leaders' Council Fellow and 2004 Leadership Trenton Fellow.

Ms. Walton and her husband reside in Burlington Township, New Jersey with their sons.