

Disability Justice Task Force 2025

Symposium Speaker Biographies

Justice Debra L. Stephens, Washington Supreme Court Chief Justice

The Honorable Debra L. Stephens has been a member of the Washington State Supreme Court since January 2008 and began serving a second time as the Court's Chief Justice in January 2025. Chief Justice Stephens previously served as a judge for Division Three of the Court of Appeals, becoming both the first judge from that court and the first woman from Eastern Washington to join the Washington State Supreme Court. A native of Spokane, Washington, she practiced law and taught as an adjunct professor at Gonzaga University School of Law before taking the bench. Additionally, she served for over a decade as a school board director and chair. Chief Justice Stephens has appeared as counsel more than 125 times before the Washington State Supreme Court, as well as the Idaho Supreme Court, the United States Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit, and as counsel of record in the United States Supreme Court.

Chief Justice Stephens is deeply committed to advancing justice and improving the legal system in Washington State and beyond. A leader in judicial and public education, she serves on the Washington Civic Learning Council and received the "Justice Robert F. Utter Award" for her outstanding contributions to civic leadership in the state. She is a founding executive committee member of the National Courts and Sciences Institute (NCSI) and a board member of the National Judicial College's Dividing the Waters program, which supports judicial education on science and water law issues. Throughout her time on the bench, Chief Justice Stephens has served as a member and co-chair of the Board for Judicial Administration, as well as a member and chair of several statewide judicial education and improvement committees. She is also active in the National and International Association of Women Judges, where she co-chairs its Judicial Independence Committee. Internationally, Chief Justice Stephens has worked with USAID to train foreign judges on judicial independence and the rule of law.

Chief Justice Stephens has received numerous accolades for her work, including the 2022 "Judge of the Year" award from the Washington State Association for Justice and the "Innovating Justice" award from the Board for Judicial Administration, recognizing her leadership of the judicial branch during the COVID-19 crisis. Along with her colleagues, she was honored with the 2021 "Judicial Leadership" award from the Access to Justice Board. She is also the recipient of the "Myra Bradwell Award" from the Gonzaga Women's Law Caucus, the "President's Award" from Washington Women Lawyers, the "Leadership & Justice Award" from MAMAS (Mother Attorneys Mentoring Association of Seattle), and the "Distinguished Judicial Service Award" from Gonzaga University School of Law. In 2023, Chief Justice Stephens was named a Rodel Judicial Fellow and participated in discussion forums with fellow jurists to advance the role of the courts in strengthening democracy.

Chief Justice Stephens and her husband have two grown children and a granddaughter. She enjoys tennis, golf, pickleball and spending time with family and friends in Hells Canyon.

Justice G. Helen Whitener, Washington State Supreme Court Justice

Justice G. Helen Whitener was appointed to the Washington State Supreme Court in April 2020 and she was subsequently elected twice by the voters to retain her position on the State Supreme Court.

Prior to her appointment to Washington State's highest court, Justice Whitener served as a Pierce County Superior Court judge. Justice Whitener also served as a judge on the Washington State Board of Industrial Insurance Appeals and as a pro-tem judge in Pierce County District Court and the City of Tacoma Municipal Court. Before becoming a judge, Justice Whitener litigated both civil and criminal cases for 14 years as first a prosecutor and defense attorney and later as a managing partner of the law firm of Whitener Rainey Writt PS.

Justice Whitener is a faculty member of the National Judicial College and a former faculty member of the Washington State Judicial College. Justice Whitener is Chair of the state's Annual Judicial Conference Planning Committee, and is the Appellate Court Representative to the Washington Supreme Court Interpreter Commission. Justice Whitener is also co-chair of the Supreme Court's Disability and Justice Task Force, and serves on the Board of Directors of the IALGBT Judges. Justice Whitener is the former co-chair of the Washington State Minority and Justice Commission, a former court representative on the Washington State Office of Civil Legal Aid Oversight Committee, and is also a former chair and co-chair of the Washington State Superior Court Judges' Association-Equity and Fairness Committee.

Additionally, Justice Whitener is a judicial member of the International Association of Women Judges, the American Judges Association, Washington Women Lawyers and the Advisory Council for the QLaw Association of Washington

Justice Whitener is the first Black woman to serve on the Washington State Supreme Court, the fourth immigrant-born Justice and the first Black LGBT Supreme Court Justice in the nation and the State of Washington. Justice Whitener identifies as a person with a disability and speaks often to locally, nationally, and internationally organizations on human rights, and access to justice.

Justice Whitener is well recognized by the legal community for her commitment to justice and equity. Her many awards include in 2022 an Honorary Doctor of Laws degree from the University of Puget Sound, Tacoma, Washington, and the ABA's Stonewall Award. In 2020, Justice Whitener received the International Association of LGBT (IALGBT) Judges President's Award, 2021 Public Official of the Year by The Evergreen State College's Master of Public Administration Program, and The Western Region of the National Black Law Students Association Judge of the Year Award. In 2020 Justice Whitener was named a Distinguished 400 Awardee by the 400 Years of African American History Commission and received the Washington Women Lawyers Chief Justice Mary Fairhurst Passing the Torch Award and the International Association of LGBTQ+ Judges President's Award. In 2019, Justice Whitener received the Washington State Bar Association's Charles Z. Smith Excellence in Diversity and Inclusion Award, the King County Washington Women Lawyers President's Award, the Tacoma-Pierce County Bar Association Service to Diversity Award, and the Seattle University

School of Law and Women's Law Caucus Woman of the Year Award. In 2018, Justice Whitener received the Pierce County Washington Women Lawyers Woman of the Year Award.

Katherine A. Perez, JD, PhD, Director, The Coelho Center for Disability Law, Policy and Innovation at Loyola Law School

Katherine Pérez became the inaugural Director of The Coelho Center for Disability Law, Policy, and Innovation at Loyola Marymount University in 2018. In this role, she is responsible for the development of the Center and leads the Center's research, policy initiatives, programmatic development, and management of the leadership team. As Director, Katherine created the Coelho Law Fellowship, a one-of-a-kind pre-law program designed (1) to increase the representation of people with disabilities in the legal profession, (2) to amplify focus of disability and ableism in the law, and (3) to tackle ableism and systemic barriers in pre-law preparation, law school admissions, and law school. To date, the law fellowship has provided programming and mentorship to 230 college students and recent graduates with disabilities.

Katherine earned her J.D. from UCLA School of Law in 2013 and her Ph.D. in Disability Studies from the University of Illinois at Chicago in 2024. In her dissertation titled "Disability Law Stories: A Disability Studies and Critical Race (Dis/Crit) Legal Analysis using Storytelling as Methodology", Katherine provides rich historical context to three Supreme Court (1969-1986) cases involving competency and insanity in criminal jurisprudence. Her academic work extends to immigration law, where she argues for an intersectional, multidisciplinary approach that incorporates disability advocacy.

Katherine's personal experiences as a queer Latina with psychiatric disabilities and a sibling to an Autistic woman with intellectual disabilities inform her work. She has engaged in disability advocacy on local, national, and international levels, including as a Peace Corps volunteer in Peru and as a co-founder of The National Coalition of Latinxs with Disabilities. Her work has earned her recognition, including the Paul G. Hearne Award from the American Association of People with Disabilities in 2017 and the Chai Feldblum Award in 2024. Katherine has served on multiple boards, advisory boards, coalitions and committees related to disability and legal advocacy. As a Visiting Professor of Law, Katherine teaches Disability Rights Law at Loyola Law School.

Kabir Amari, M. Ed. (they/them) Chief Executive Officer

Kabir Amari is the Chief Executive Officer and founder of KMG Consulting Firm, and one of the lead strategists and researchers for this proposed project. They are a proud graduate of The Johns Hopkins University, earning a master's degree in education, and Florida A&M University, where they earned a bachelor of science degree in political science with a minor in global security studies and international relations.

Kabir Amari facilitates trainings that help participants critically examine the ways that implicit bias related to race, gender, and disability impacts the work environment and team productivity. They have an extensive background in Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, Accessibility, and Belonging (DEIAB) and have facilitated over 350 courses for organizations across the U.S. on intersectionality, racial, gender, and disability equity. They constantly engage in professional development work to better develop and inform their craft. Kabir Amari completed the Kingian (Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.) Nonviolence 365 © training with the MLK Center in Atlanta, GA. Like Dr. King, their values are rooted in nonviolence and love for humanity.

Before founding KMG Consulting, they worked as a DEIAB strategist within the seventh-largest school district in the U.S. and as a National Managing Director at Teach For America. Within these roles, they facilitated dozens of focus groups, created curricula for numerous certification courses, and guided several large-scale entities through the creation and implementation of DEIAB strategic plans. As a DEIAB practitioner with a background in education, they utilize proven pedagogical techniques to engage and inform their training participants. Kabir Amari's work in DEIAB on behalf of transgender and gender-expansive youth has been twice published by the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine.

Alexandra Audate, Esq., LL.M. (she/her) Lead Disability Consultant

Alexandra Stephanie Audate is a licensed attorney in Florida. She joins KMG Consulting with nearly two decades of experience in DEIAB consulting, organizational management, and legal compliance. She is a graduate of St. Thomas University, where she earned a Bachelor's degree, a law degree, and a master's of law in Intercultural Human Rights.

Alexandra is a disability justice expert, a well-respected lawyer, and a trained restorative justice practitioner who focuses on community healing in response to systemic harm, particularly ableism and racism.

Before working as a consultant, she was a litigator, mainly representing non-English-speaking and disabled clients. As a person with disabilities, she often advocated on behalf of her clients in and out of the Courtroom.

In her career, she has worked as the Deputy Director of a major nonprofit organization, coached various CEOs and executive directors through the incorporation of disability justice principles in their organizations, the implementation of compliance processes, and managed several law firms. She has supported them in recreating organizational structures, drafting and implementing strategic plans, and revamping their mission statements, processes, and policies to become more inclusive and equitable.

Alexandra is fluent in English, Spanish, Haitian Creole, and French.

Mary Rojas, Esq., M.A. (she/her) Disability/Mental Health Law Consultant

Mary Rojas is an attorney, social justice advocate, and an immigration and criminal justice consultant with KMG Consulting Firm.

Mary's education began at *home*, surrounded by her family of strong Guatemalan and Dominican women. With a Bachelor's degree in Criminal Justice, a Master's degree in Pastoral Ministry, and a Juris Doctor degree from the Benjamin L. Crump College of Law at St. Thomas University, Mary possesses a unique blend of legal expertise and a compassionate approach to helping others. She worked as a high school educator for six years, where she was proud to have truly worked to empower her students.

As an Assistant Public Defender in Miami and Broward County, Mary has witnessed how critical language access is in navigating the complexities of the legal system. Her lived experiences as a child of immigration, her passion for social justice, and her commitment to social change have made her a fierce advocate in and out of the courtroom. Over the years, she has proven herself to be a sharp litigator and compassionate counsel for her clients who are trying to maneuver the criminal justice system and the prison industrial complex. She has dedicated her career to championing the rights of marginalized communities and breaking down barriers for people of color in all settings. With a deep-rooted commitment to social justice, Mary Rojas stands as part of the 2% of Latina attorneys in the United States. She firmly believes in creating a more inclusive and equitable society, where every voice is heard and every individual is treated with dignity and respect.

Mary's unwavering dedication extends beyond the courtroom. Whether she is representing clients in court or working on advocacy campaigns, her goal is always to empower people to educate and advocate for themselves. Mary aims to educate and empower individuals by providing valuable resources, insights, and updates on important legal and nonlegal matters. In her spare time, Mary enjoys traveling, dancing and going to concerts. She is a proud native and resident of Miami-Dade County, FL.

Jerri-Ann Danso, M.S., M.S., Ph.D. (she/her) Lead Data Analyst

Jerri Berry Danso is a research and evaluation consultant with over a decade of professional experience in assessment, methodology, research, and evaluation across diverse contexts, including higher education institutions, nonprofit organizations, and community-based initiatives. She holds a Bachelor's degree in Business Administration (major in Management), a Master's degree in Student Personnel in Higher Education, and an additional Master's degree in Research and Evaluation Methodology, all from the University of Florida. Jerri is currently pursuing her doctoral studies full-time in Evaluation, Statistics, and Methodology at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville.

Throughout her career, Jerri has consistently dedicated herself to enhancing the quality and equity of educational and community outcomes through robust and culturally responsive measurement practices. Her extensive background includes leading institutional assessment initiatives, designing comprehensive research methodologies, and implementing innovative evaluation strategies tailored to diverse educational and community settings. Driven by a profound commitment to social impact, Jerri employs an equity-focused approach, ensuring that

her methods remain inclusive and responsive to the unique needs of the communities she serves. Her passion lies in leveraging rigorous data analysis and methodological expertise to inform policy decisions and foster meaningful change. Her enthusiasm for community betterment is matched only by her dedication to empowering stakeholders through meaningful, data-driven insights.

Beyond her professional commitments, Jerri is an avid reader who deeply values quality time with her family, including her spouse and vibrant three-year-old son. She enjoys connecting with people, visiting theme parks, going on nature walks, and finding joy in life's simple, everyday moments.

WaziHanska Cook (He/Him) Consultant with KMG Consulting Firm

WaziHanska Cook has over 35 years of experience as a teacher, administrator, and leader in American Indian education. He retired as National Senior Managing Director of Teach For America's Native Alliance, serving American Indian, Alaska Native, and Native Hawaiian students. Prior to joining staff at Teach For America, he was principal of Pine Ridge High School on the Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota. Cook has served as president and board member of the National Indian Education Association (2006-2009 and 2014-2017) and board member of the South Dakota Education Association, South Dakota Indian Education Association, and as a founding school board member on the American Indian Academy of Denver. In addition, WaziHanska served on the Technical Review Panel of the National Indian Education Study and was previously called to serve by President Obama on the National Advisory Council on Indian Education.

Cook is the recipient of many teaching awards, including Teacher of the Year at Little Wound, Lower Brule, and Crow Creek Tribal Schools; South Dakota's 2005 Milken National Educator; Crazy Horse Memorial/SD American Indian 2006 Teacher of the Year; and the National Indian Education Association 2006 Teacher of the Year. Additionally, Cook has been named one of Black Hills State University's 125 Most Accomplished Alumni.

An enrolled citizen of the Oglala Lakota Nation, Cook received his bachelor's degree in secondary education from Black Hills State University and a master's degree in education administration from Oglala Lakota College. He is married to Daphne Richards-Cook, and they have two sons. Cook is retired and works as a contracted consultant with KMG Consulting Firm.

Laurie Allen, Senior Accessibility Technology Evangelist, Microsoft

Laurie Allen is a seasoned technology professional with over 25 years of diverse experience, ranging from consulting to global alliance management, product management, leading development teams, and driving customer success. In 2015, Laurie became a quadriplegic due to a spinal cord injury, which profoundly influenced her career trajectory. Since then, she has dedicated herself to utilizing and promoting assistive technology and accessibility. As a Senior Accessibility Technology Evangelist with Microsoft, Laurie leverages her extensive tech background and personal experience as a person with a disability to advocate for disability

inclusion and champion accessible solutions. She is deeply involved in advancing AI's role in bridging the disability divide and provides key resources and guidance for accessibility support.

Brian McMahon, Senior Copyright Counsel, Intellectual Property Group, Microsoft

Brian F. McMahon is a Senior Copyright Counsel at Microsoft with over 20 years of experience in legal practice. Throughout his career in private practice before joining Microsoft last year, Brian had advised both internal and external clients on a wide range of issues, spanning from ethics to intellectual property, and to issues impacting the day-to-day operations of small businesses—including law firms. With respect to ethical issues, Brian has provided formal and informal guidance on issues implicating conflicts of interest, duties of candor, roles of supervisory attorneys, and duties to current and former clients. He previously presented to the National Association of Patent Professionals on the ethical duties members had to the United States Patent and Trademark Office. He has also served on the Ethics Advisory Council for the Association of Graduates of the United States Military Academy. Brian has been an active member of the Washington Bar since 2012 and is currently serving the WSBA as a Committee Member for the Judicial Recommendation Committee.

Judge David Whedbee, King County Superior Court Judge

Judge David Whedbee joined the King County Superior Court bench on September 16, 2019, in Seattle, Washington, after appointment by Governor Jay Inslee. Judge Whedbee is currently assigned to the Civil Rotation, and is Co-Chair of the Diversity-Equity-Inclusion (DEI) Committee and sits on the Courts and Community Committee. Judge Whedbee is also the Co-Chair of the Disability Justice Task Force created by the Supreme Court of Washington.

Before joining the bench, Judge Whedbee worked for 12 years as a civil rights lawyer. During this time, he was also a board member and cooperating attorney for the ACLU of Washington, and in 2018-2019 served as Washington's representative to the ACLU's National Board.

After graduating from the University of Washington School of Law in 2004, Judge Whedbee served as a law clerk for U.S. District Court Judge Helen G. Berrigan in the Eastern District of Louisiana and Judge Ronald M. Gould in the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit. During law school, he also was a judicial extern for U.S. District Court Judge Marsha J. Pechman of the Western District of Washington.

Judge Whedbee has been a resident of Seattle since 1991 after graduating from Pomona College *magna cum laude* with a degree in French and German literature and being recognized as an All-American scholar-athlete in soccer. Judge Whedbee spent several years working with a local immigration lawyer as a paralegal in the 1990s, with a focus on preparing asylum claims for French-speaking Africans among many others from diverse nationalities. An avid record

collector, he also worked in alternative radio for the local pioneering station KCMU. In 1997, Judge Whedbee obtained a Master's Degree in international history from the London School of Economics, concentrating on post-WW II independence movements and French decolonization.

Judge Whedbee, a paraplegic after a rock-climbing accident in 1997, is eager to improve physical and programmatic access to Washington courts and beyond for persons with disabilities.

Judge David E. Freeman, Whatcom County Superior Court Judge

Judge David Freeman joined the Whatcom County Superior Court bench in January 2020, after appointment by Governor Jay Inslee. Before joining the bench, Judge Freeman was a review judge in the Commissioner's Review Office for the Washington State Employee Security Department. Prior to that, he served as a deputy prosecuting attorney and special deputy prosecuting attorney for the Whatcom County Prosecuting Attorney's Office. He handled mostly juvenile cases during his tenure as a prosecuting attorney.

Judge Freeman is a native Washingtonian. He obtained his bachelor's degree from Western Washington University with a degree in political science, before receiving his law degree from Willamette University College of Law in Salem, Oregon. Judge Freeman decided to go into law, in part, because he knew it was work, he could do if he were to go blind. At 14 years of age, Judge Freeman was diagnosed with retinitis pigmentosa, a disease in which the retina slowly degenerates causing vision loss. He frequently participates in the Foundation Fighting Blindness's Washington Vision Walk fundraiser. Judge Freeman is proud to serve Whatcom County.