

**Rest is
Black Liberation**

ACT Now!

2ND NATIONAL CONFERENCE ON
BLACK MENTAL HEALTH & WELLBEING

Written by:
Solomon Lome
Liben Gebremikael

Organized by:
 **TAIBU** COMMUNITY
HEALTH CENTRE

CONFERENCE REPORT

Sponsored by:



Public Health
Agency of Canada



Network for the Advancement
of Black Communities



Bell
Let's Talk

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Message from the CEO



On behalf of the Board of Directors, TAIBU's staff, the community we serve, and the ACT Now! conference planning committee, I am very excited to see this conference happen again. The ACT Now! conference was initiated in 2023 with the aim of creating a national dialogue around the mental health of Black Canadians thereby establishing a foundational network as well as building the capacity of organizations and individuals to respond to the evolving and complex needs of the Black communities across Canada.

TAIBU is so privileged to host the 2nd annual national conference on Black mental health to build on the conversations that was initiated last year. I have no doubt that the conversation has immensely contributed to our collaborative and sustainable efforts of promoting Black mental health and well-being and addressing systemic anti-Black racism. I would like to thank all who have been involved in putting the conference together and making it happen, including the planning committee, the collaborators, the advisory committee, our funders, and all stakeholders across the country.

Thank you. We did it again! We came together again, We had difficult but important conversation, we experienced rest together and we planned together. I look forward to next year's conference growing bigger, bolder, and more resonating. In the meantime, let us find REST!

REST is liberation!

Liben Gebremikael

Liben Gebremikael, CEO
TAIBU Community Health Centre

Background

TAIBU Community Health Centre hosted the second national conference on Black Mental Health and Wellbeing entitled "ACT Now! 2nd National Conference on Black Mental Health and Wellbeing" under the theme **Rest is Black Liberation**. The ACT Now! Black Mental Health and Wellness Annual National Conference is an annual event conceived in 2023.

As part of the Amandla Olwazi project the conference was intended to generate opportunities for Afrocentric knowledge gathering, sharing, knowledge mobilization, and networking centered on **Black mental health in Canada**.

ACT Now! was born out of a direct request from the stakeholders of the Amandla Olwazi project. When in 2023, the first ACT Now! was convened, the participants requested for the conference to become an annual event. Most conferences tend to be academic-oriented and focused on research findings. The planning and execution of the The ACT Now! Conference is based on experiential engagement and collecting knowing, gathering and mobilizing knowledge following the African-centered principles of 'Nothing about us without us' and 'Kujichagulia – the principle of Self-Determination. Act Now! is unique in that it is embedded into the cultural, diversity, and unique needs of Black and racialized communities and brings together people from all walks of life across Canada.

The conference created an open, inclusive, and culturally safe space where participants were able to freely discuss issues affecting their mental health and well-being.

The conference created more opportunities for networking, pulling resources, and knowledge at the national level. Last year's conference engaged predominantly Black-led and Black-focused organizations and individuals with lived experiences.

The 2024 conference envisaged a broader dialogue and knowledge exchange between community and mainstream organizations and institutions to identify a path towards systems change. The knowledge gathered from this event will continue to garner additional Afrocentric 'knowledge' to be translated into 'power' for change (hence Olwazi into Amandla = Amandla Olwazi – the Power of Knowledge) In addition, the experience of sharing and exchanging various perspectives and lived experiences within the diverse Black communities has an enriching and healing effect for the participants.

The three-day hybrid national conference was held in Toronto at Pan Pacific Toronto, from March 20-22, 2024. It targeted participants from diverse Black populations representing multidisciplinary backgrounds across 7 provinces.

Conference participants were from a variety of mainstream organizations and institutions, grassroots organizations serving racialized communities, diverse and multidisciplinary team members from health and social services sectors, Black leaders, Black elders, Black youth, Black 2SLGBTQ+, newcomers, academia, research institutions, interfaith communities, and decision-makers.

Over 300 participants (260 in-person and 100+ online) participated in the conference.

A nine-member conference planning committee representing various sectors and provinces were responsible for the successful planning and execution of the Conference.

The conference addressed a series of topics and themes around *Black mental health*. The themes included, were selected based on the recommendations suggested by the 2023 ACT Now! conference participants.

Themes include:

- **The Power of Community (Healing and Thriving in Community)**
- **Intergenerational Health / Wealth**
- **Policy, Research & Advocacy**
- **Rest as Liberation**

Participants

Pre-conference Registrants

Two sets of data were collected from the participants, one prior to the conference and a second as part of the post-conference evaluation. Participants registered for the event through an online portal, by invitations, through referrals, and promotion through work colleagues. The conference questionnaire was used to gather basic demographic information of participants. Accordingly, data was collected from **175 registrants**. Their responses was further used to inform the content and program flow.

Participants were from seven Canadian provinces and 35 cities across Canada. In terms of country of origin, they represented over 30 countries. 75% and 22% of the registered participants were female and male respectively. The remaining 2% identified as others and 1% preferred not to identify their gender.



300+ Participants
(260 in-person and 100+ online)



Sector Represented:
33% - Mental Health
18% - Community Health
15% - Social Services
7% - Primary Care

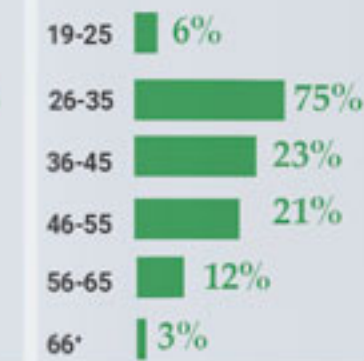


30+ Country of Origin
35 cities across Canada
7 provinces

Registrants by Gender



Registrants by Age



Representation by Region



Theme preference

When asked about the three top themes they would like to participate in, the majority of registrants selected the Power of Community.



Mental Health for Black Canadians Project Update

Five projects funded under the Public Health Agency of Canada (PHAC) - the Mental Health of Black Canadians (MHBC) projects provided updates on their respective projects. Prior the funded projects presentations, Public Health Agency of Canada presented a snapshot of the preliminary findings of all the MHBC funded project deliverables.

Public Health Agency of Canada: A snapshot or preliminary findings – Mental Health for Black Canadians (MHBC) funding for community support

- The presentation provided a high-level report on all the projects funded by Public Health Project under the Mental Health for Black Communities funding stream.
- The objectives of the funding was to increase understanding of the unique barriers for mental health for Black Canadians, increase knowledge of effective culturally focused approach and programs and to increase capacity within the Black communities in Canada
- The focus of the funding was to develop, mobilize and enhance mental health promotion for Black communities
- The report was compiled using a methodology of analyzing and synthesizing data from project reports received between 2019 and 2024 and other quantitative and qualitative data.

The Culturally focused interventions implemented across the projects included:

- Collaborative approach
- Trauma informed care
- Services offered by Black led and Black informed spaces
- Innovative programs responsive to cultural need
- Acknowledging the diversity of Black diversities



71% of project participants reported improvement of their social environments.



65% of project participants reported increasing their skills or ability to support their mental health.

REACH:

- The Projects reached over 7,000 Black individuals. 60% were female, 30% male and 5% gender diverse. 41% children & youth, 53% adults and 6% older adults participated in a variety of innovative programs and activities.



7,743 Black Canadians Reached

60% females
35% males
5% gender diverse

41% children and youth
53% adults
6% older adults

OUTCOMES:

71% of project participants stated that they experienced increase knowledge of mental health and impact of anti-Black racism on their mental health. 65% said that they had increased their skills and abilities to cope with their mental health including through arts, spoken word, music. Project participants also experienced improved social environments, strong social support, reduced stigma and strengthening of the fabric of communities. 61% experienced improved mental health and increase sense of wellbeing. The projects have also developed various knowledge mobilization products.

Funded Projects Map

The various streams of the MHBC Fund have supported 23 projects across five provinces.



Alberta

- University of Calgary
- Council for the Advancement of African Canadians (Africa Centre)
- Ribbon Rouge Foundation

Manitoba

- Barbados Association of Winnipeg Inc.

Ontario

- Kaleo Productions Inc.
- Aspire for Higher (2)
- Women's Health in Women's Hands Community Health Centre
- Black Creek Community Health Centre
- Black Health Alliance
- University of Ottawa
- TAIBU Community Health Centre (2)
- York University
- Across Boundaries - An Ethnoracial Mental Health Center (In partnership with Adornment Stories)

Nova Scotia

- Dalhousie University
- African Diaspora Association of the Maritimes (ADAM)
- The Lesbian Gay Bisexual Youth Project society (The Youth Project)

Quebec

- Regroupement des intervenant(e)s d'origine haïtienne
- Événement Hoodstock (2)
- Université du Québec à Montréal
- Head and Hands / À deux Mains

Policy, Research and Advocacy

Rest is essential for marginalized communities, particularly for Black individuals who face ongoing systemic barriers in various areas such as education, economics, and politics. Despite the urgent need to advocate for rights and justice, it is important to incorporate rest to sustain the fight for equality.

Rest is not just necessary for personal well-being but also critical for effective policy work, research, and advocacy. Using the African tradition of the 'talking stick' the participants in the breakout rooms contributing to the knowledge synthesizing process.

Rest as pre-requisite for policy, research and advocacy

Being Black is tiring. In order to create the revolution, we need to rest. The rest is a pre-requisite for policy, research and advocacy work. Black communities need rest to think about what we are doing, what we want to do, how we want to do it with, how we want to do it, why we want to do it and where we want to do it.

Recognize the default setting of policy, research and advocacy work

When it comes to policy, research and advocacy work, we need to pay attention of not falling into the default setting of Eurocentric approach. It is also important to recognize that many organizations and agencies in this area of work are part of the systems structure who are complicit in preventing rest due to their internal policies and ways of doing. There needs to be genuine acknowledgement of the impact of anti-Black racism and transparent process of engaging communities in research or policy development work that requires meaningful and equal participation of communities with lived experience. Related to this, views were also shared that Black issues are often limited to Black History Month.

Ujima - Collective Responsibility

Collective action was another prominent theme that came out of the breakout discussion. Participants made a very clear that a collective approach to engaging in policy, research and advocacy was imperative. Rest can only be achieved collectively. Black communities have to advocate together. We need to connect research together, if we need to cross the river together, we need to work on policy, research and advocacy as a collective. Working spaces such as the ACT House, conference is great to come together where we can talk and plan together in support. Collaboration among Black-led organizations and a stronger network helps to distribute the burden and amplify the impact at the same time.

Representation

In addition to coming together uniting diverse backgrounds and experiences towards engaging in policy and advocacy work for change, representation in different spaces and in particular decision making and political spaces was highlighted as an important strategy. Participants shared personal experiences in political spaces and pointed out that even being a volunteer creates an opportunity to influence policies. Our biggest mistake is staying away from such spaces of power and influence.

The paradox of solving a problem that we did not create

Part of the fatigue that Black communities experience on an ongoing basis is the fact that we are trying to solve a systemic problem that we did not create. It is therefore imperative that systems and those in power have to be made accountable instead of overburdening Black individuals/communities with the responsibility of providing and acting on solutions.

Many times, the paradox is rendered more complex when organizations are put in a difficult situation where they receive funding from the government and are lessened to engage in advocacy initiatives and activities. We need to find a way of working through this challenge to be able to amplify the voices of our communities, so they can rest in liberation.



Evaluation

The evaluation of the conference covered a few questions:

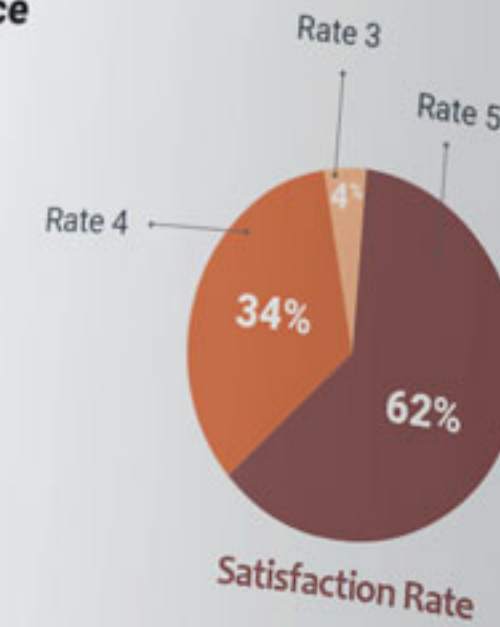
- How satisfied are you about the conference?
- How will you realize Rest as Liberation?
- How will you use the information and knowledge gained?
- What are your calls to action for service providers and for policy makers / governments?
- How can we improve the conference?

Overall experience of the Conference

The average satisfaction rate given by participants was 4.5 out of 5.

Some quotes from the participants include:

- "The conference was absolutely phenomenal, keep up the great work!"
- "The conference was well organized. Volunteers were accessible"
- "It seems to get better every year"
- "I like the way it was organized. Venue was great. Rooms, food and snack were great. It was an enjoyable conference"
- "I will make time for deliberate rest and I have learned to say NO without feeling under pressure..."



How will you realize Rest as Liberation?

The repeated theme that emerged in the response to this question was **intentionality**.

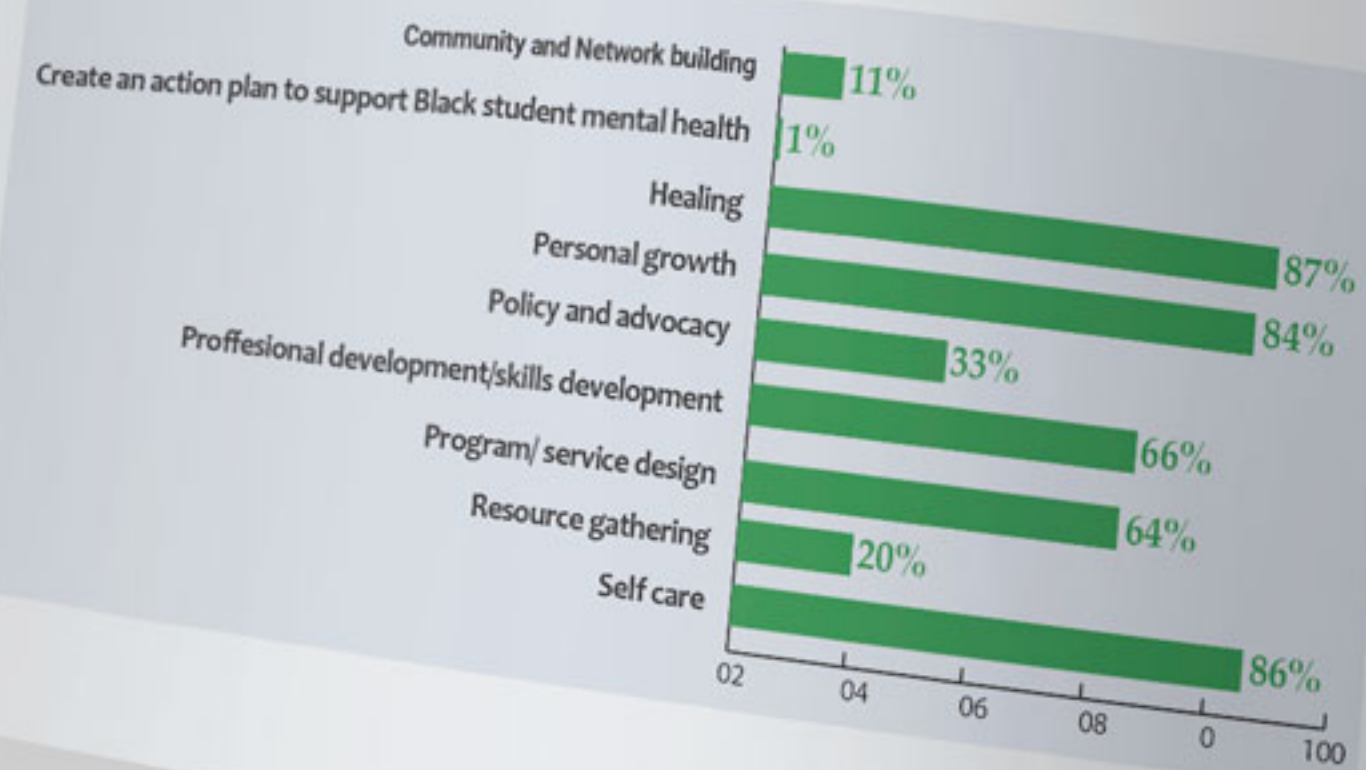
Some quotes from the participants include:

- "I will be more intentional about taking rest"
- "I will choose the battles to tackle"
- "Being a stronger ally for my colleagues and clients"
- "Take my self-care as a priority"

- "... not to try harder to prove myself"
- "Apply everyday routine and be consistent"
- "Be intentional for self-care, self-aware, self-advocate and self-healing"
- "Giving myself permission to rest"
- "Stop Feeling guilty for resting"

How will you use the information gained?

Participants were asked to select from a menu of options to answer this question.



In view of the above, how do we Rest and make it our Liberation? Which is the ask of the conference.

- It has been mentioned during the course of the two days that we need to force the government to develop a policy for Black Mental Health – A Black Mental Health Strategy and hold them accountable. We need to remember who we are. We need to do the 'Sankofa'. In the Ethiopian tradition 'Sankofa' is the process of removing the jiggers flea completely from the feet – specifically from the skin part of the nail in the foot. If it is not removed fully and completely, it continues to infect the area resulting in complication and in some cases requiring amputation. In the same way, we need to dig out and remove the dis-ease before it infects the entire body – the community.
- The easiest way to remove the dis-ease is 'Sankofa' – to go back and fetch. Return to our original ways of who we are, of how we are, how we do and what our purpose is. When we remember who we are then Rest becomes easy. Sleep is part of it but Rest is stillness, the listening to self, the spiritual self.
- We usually tend to say that 'nobody cares so I have to do it myself. I must sacrifice myself'. This is a statement that emanates from a place of unwellness. Black leaders are in pain. We want to address anti-Black racism. We want to fix anti-Black racism so much that it is killing us. However, we need to realize that our ancestors have already paid the price.

- **What is our calling? What should we do? Commit to not die for anti-Black racism!** Live! Live to build our people. *"I have stopped trying to confront or dismantle institutions. I am choosing to build my people, to make them strong and healthy. I am choosing to build structures that will support us. To bring my people to love themselves. We have a choice. The systems do not care. They are not broken. They have been built that way. And when we are dead, they come to our funerals and read their letters".*

Elder Aina-Nia asked the participants to engage in an exercise where they would write on a piece of paper what they would need to release in order to make the Black Mental Health Strategy a reality. Participants were asked to write down what is stopping to live out their vision. If it stops one individual, it stops everyone – the community. Examples are, distrust, jealousy, resentment of the past etc.

Once the participants had written on the piece of paper, they were asked to place the note in a pot which later was burnt as a demonstration of releasing those hurdles towards rest and building the strategy. The note was to be signed and dated. This was an agreement that everyone ought to make with oneself because REST IS LIBERATION!

I give myself permission to REST by

(e.g. taking 30 seconds every hour to do a breathing exercise, to sleep at 6 hrs a day, to stop work at 5pm, to make Saturday a day of joy) because I deserve to experience LIBERATION so that I may _____ (e.g. fulfill my destiny on planet earth to be the best African descendant).

I LOVE MYSELF!

Rest is Black Liberation Emcee, Moderating And Facilitation

The ACT Now! 2024 Conference's success would have not been achieved without the Emceeing, moderation, facilitation and thoughtful engagement and care provided by two amazing community members who made the two and half days enjoyable, fun and captivating.

Marlon Cole – Public Speaker, Brand Strategist and Mental Health Ambassador, and **Adama Bundu** - Family & Child Interventionist / Family & Parenting Coach.

On behalf of all of the Conference participants, WE THANK YOU!!



EMCEE Marlon Cole and Adama Bundu ended the conference with the words of Marianne Williamson:

"Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness that most frightens us. We ask ourselves, 'Who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented, fabulous?' Actually, who are you not to be? You are a child of aserve the world.

There is nothing enlightened about shrinking so that other people won't feel insecure around you. We are all meant to shine, as children do.

We were born to make manifest the glory of God that is within us. It's not just in some of us; it's in everyone. And as we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same. As we are liberated from our own fear, our presence automatically liberates others."



Theme for Next Conference

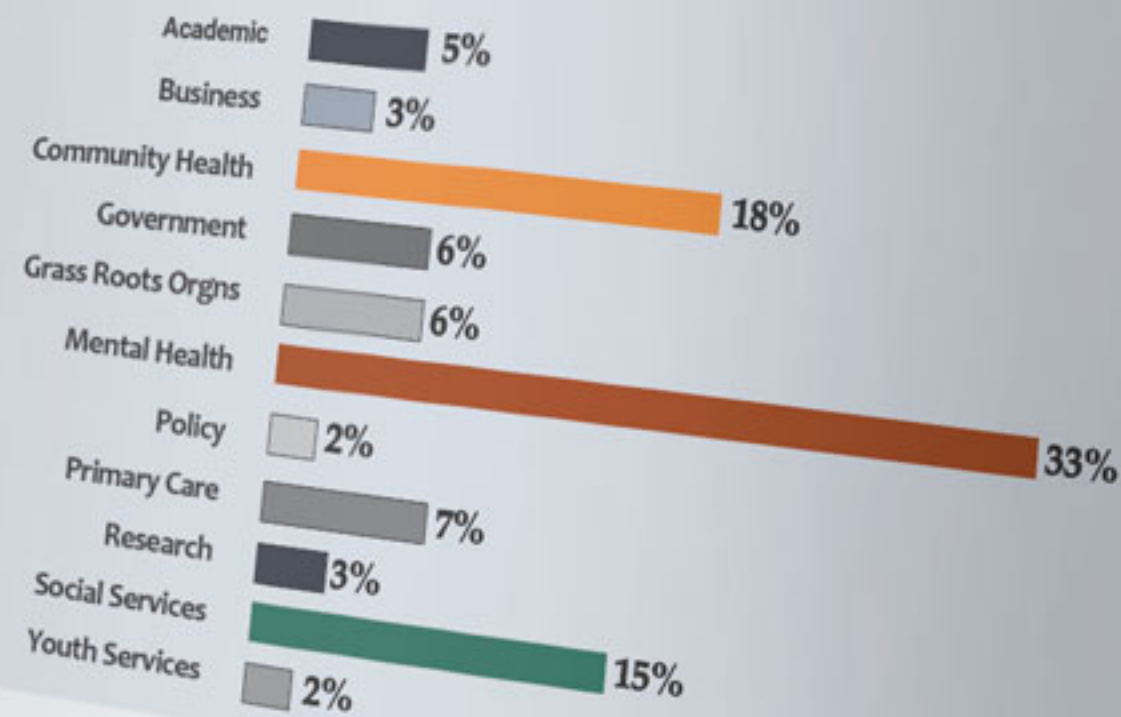
- Black Intersectionality
- Nia – Purpose
- Community Cohesion
- Process to Progress
- The power of Hope
- The power of mental health in Ubuntu
- Black community Development
- Let's Learn together hand in hand
- Research as Resistance
- Reconnecting to Africa
- Empowerment, Emotional Regulation & Mindfulness
- Something on Youth or Generation
- Black Families – the new era

Feedback from Community Stakeholders & Partners

A meeting with community stakeholders and partners was held post-conference to gather reflections and feedback on three main areas: what went well, what didn't work well, and improvements for future opportunities. The summary of their reflection include:

- The team reflected on the evolution of their project over the past few years, noting the difference between the initial motivation and the emotional release seen in subsequent conferences. They emphasized the importance of creating a space at the conference for emotional expression and suggested adding an educational component to help frontline workers articulate their needs to policymakers.
- The team highlighted the benefits of having committee members from different provinces, acknowledging the varied landscapes and challenges.
- They emphasized the importance of addressing intersections such as housing and mental health, particularly acknowledging cultural nuances within Black communities, such as intergenerational households.
- The participants also reflected on the need to shift from merely surviving to thriving, inspired by a previous conference speaker. They pointed out the importance of addressing intersectionality, including gender and sexual identity, noting the high suicide rates among Black transgender individuals and the need for resources and support.
- It was acknowledged that appropriate funding for the conference is crucial to be able to offer the conference cost free. The conference fee has limited the participation of many grassroots organizations such as those dealing with housing, food banks, and faith-based groups. While MHBC-funded agency staff could participate due to specific funding allocations, many grassroots organizations were not able to do so.
- Another suggestion was to be more intentional about including youth and children in future conferences to foster intergenerational dialogue and understanding. The involvement of children through art competitions to express their mental health experiences was an idea that was proposed. The stakeholders also suggested opportunities for collective action among organizations to advocate for funding and support from policymakers.
- Despite the snowstorm cutting the conference short and limiting data collection, the need for actionable feedback was acknowledged for the need for actionable feedback.

Sectors represented at the conference



Speakers

Dr. Hamdi Mohamed

Dr. Hamdi Mohamed is a researcher, an organizational development consultant, and the Co-Founder of Kaafi Integrative Health. She has over 20 years of professional experience in leading organizations, consulting, teaching, and designing and implementing organizational change and research projects.

Dr. Mohamed is recognized for her innovative approach, designing, and facilitating highly participatory processes to co-create solutions with impact and capacity to break down old ways of thinking by providing fresh insights. She has served in

non-profit sector leadership for over 20+ years, including being the former Executive Director of the Ottawa Community Immigrant Services Organization (OCISO) and the Ottawa Rape Crisis Centre (ORCC).

Dr. Mohamed designed and taught graduate and undergraduate at Carleton University and American University Abroad and lectured widely on refugee resettlement, social work, human rights, social justice, public policy, and gender and politics in North America, Europe, and Africa. She published several research papers and contributed

to numerous scholarly works.

Dr. Mohamed has received several leadership awards recognizing her community service and professional achievements including being named a Community Builder by the Black History Ottawa and being recognized as one of the Top 10 Inspiring Citizens to Watch in Ottawa in 2010. She holds a PhD and MA in History from the University of Ottawa and a BA in African History and English Literature from the Somali National University.



Dr. Onye Nnorom

Dr. Onye Nnorom is a distinguished physician, advocate, public speaker and leader in the field of public health and equity. She is a family doctor and specialist and Associate Professor at the University of Toronto. Born in Montreal to parents of Nigerian and Irish/Scottish backgrounds, she learned at an early age the impact of social justice and the power of community action. With a deep commitment to social justice and health equity, Dr. Nnorom has dedicated her career to addressing health disparities and improving health outcomes for marginalized communities, with a particular focus on Black populations.

Dr. Nnorom completed her medical training at McGill University, where she developed a passion for community medicine and the importance of addressing social

determinants of health. She went on to pursue a Master of Public Health degree at the University of Toronto. She has led numerous initiatives aimed at reducing health disparities, promoting cultural competency in healthcare, and empowering underserved populations. From 2013 to 2018, she was the chronic disease prevention lead at TASPJ Community Health Centre, where she led several successful cancer screening initiatives which have been published in peer-reviewed journals. From 2019-2021, she was the Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion Lead, within the Department of Family and Community Medicine at the University of Toronto as well as the President of the Black Physicians' Association of Ontario where she forged a partnership between the BPAO and the DFCA

to lead and coordinate vaccine and wellness clinics across Ontario during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Dr. Nnorom is the host of a podcast called Race, Health, and Happiness, where she interviews successful Black, Indigenous, and other People of Color, providing wisdom on how to stay well in a "racialized world". Dr. Nnorom is the co-founder of the Black Health Education Collaborative, which was established to provide online educational resources on anti-racism and Black health for health professional students, clinicians, and public health practitioners. She is a mother, a dancer, host of the podcast Race, Health, and Happiness, and past president of the Black Physicians' Association of Ontario.



Shanique Edwards

Shanique Victoria is an Ontario-based psychotherapist, registered with the College of Registered Psychotherapists of Ontario (CRPO). She completed her undergraduate degree at the University of Toronto in Neuroscience and Psychology and holds a graduate degree from Tyndale University in Clinical Counselling. Shanique is a Knowledge Translation Specialist for the Cundill Centre for Child and Youth Depression at the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH).

In addition, she currently serves as the Knowledge Translation Specialist for Black Mental Health Canada (BMHC) and is a member of BMHC's Circle of Leaders. Shanique has conducted mental health workshops for non-profit and professional organizations, college and university student organizations, and corporate businesses.

She has developed and facilitated workshops, as well as written broadly on the topic of racial trauma and mental health resilience.

Noah Boakye-Yiadom

Noah Boakye-Yiadom is a dedicated health promotion facilitator with Alberta Health Services, committed to fostering mental health, preventing addiction, and addressing suicide in the communities of Lacombe County, Ponoka County, and Clearwater County.

His journey in the field of public health began with a solid foundation, earning a Bachelor of Health Sciences (BHSc) degree from the University of Western Ontario in 2005. Driven by a passion for community well-being, Noah furthered his education by obtaining a Master of Public Health (MPH) from Lakehead University in 2010.

Noah is currently a PhD Student at the University of Calgary's Cumming School of Medicine. Noah Boakye-Yiadom's story is one of passion, collaboration, and a relentless pursuit of positive change in the realm of public health. Through his work, he continues to make a lasting impact on the mental health and well-being of the communities he serves.

Acknowledgment

TAIBU would like to acknowledge the following organizations, individuals, and partners without whom this conference would have not been possible.

- Amandla Olwazi Project Advisory Committee
- Amandla Olwazi Project Collaborators
- ACT Now! 2024 Conference Sponsors
- ACT Now! 2024 Organizing Committee
- Amandla Olwazi Project team
- All partners and stakeholders
- TAIBU Ambassadors and volunteers



Sponsors

Organizing such a national event is costly and as such TAIBU proudly thanks those who share the TAIBU's vision to support the initiative and make the conference a success.

We sincerely thank the **Public Health Agency of Canada**, **Royal Bank of Canada**, **Bell Canada**, and **The Network for the Advancement of Black Communities (NABC)** for their generous support in executing this year's conference.

Service Providers

Decor:	Miders concept
AV and live streaming:	Red Sound and Lighting Inc,
French interpretation:	Cassie Pierre-Louis & Diana Saint-Jean
Interpretation equipment:	Libra Show System Inc
Coffee ceremony:	Jebena Coffee (Jalene and Marta)
Drumming:	Amadou Kienou, Negus Medhin, and their team
DJ:	Kwaku Owusu
Conference Branding Design:	Fiveline Creatives



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Liben Gebremikael

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Sponsored by:





We look forward to see you at our next Gathering in 2025



TAIBU COMMUNITY HEALTH CENTRE
27 Tapscott Road, Unit #1
Toronto, Ontario M1B 4Y7

Phone: (416) 644-3536
Email: info@taibuchc.ca
Web: taibuchc.ca

Follow us on Social Media:



Graphic Design:
Michael Scheianu
michael@fiveline.ca
www.fiveline.ca