

## 4/20/2025 - National Mobilization Meeting

### Unsung Black Women's Health Heroes

Good afternoon National Mobilization for Reproductive Justice! As a Black woman working in Behavioral Public Health, I was so excited tagged me in to give this report on notable Black Women in Black Women's Health, right on the tail end of Black Maternal Health Week (April 11-17), which was founded by the Black Mamas Matter Alliance which focuses on raising awareness of and advocacy for solving the Black Maternal Health disparities in the United States, where the Black women's maternal mortality rate is over 2.5 times the national average, and 3.5x the rate for white women - and is looking to worsen due to the current Trump administration's policies, which have removed maternal health data from government websites under the guise of dismantling DEI, put researchers on leave, and attacked the provision of culturally congruent care.

**Adah Belle Samuels Thoms, 1870- 1943-** Adah Belle Samuels Thoms was a devoted nurse who co-founded the National Association of Colored Graduate Nurses and fought for equal employment opportunities for African Americans in the American Red Cross and U.S. Army Nurse Corps during World War 1, and refused to accept rejection due to race. Her tenacity paid off when the Surgeon General agreed to a limited enrollment. After the war, 18 Black nurses were appointed to the Army Nurse Corps in order to help combat the flu epidemic. Thoms was also one of the first nurses to be inducted into the American Nurses Association Hall of Fame for her work with civil rights and Black feminist activism.

**Ionia Rollin Whipper, 1872- 1953-** As a physician and public health reformer, Ionia Rollin Whipper was one of the few African American obstetricians in Washington, D.C. in the early 1900s. After discovering some of the shockingly unsanitary conditions in which young impoverished mothers were forced to live, Whipper traveled throughout the South during the first World War with the United States Children's Bureau to educate African American mothers and midwives about public health and hygiene. Whipper devoted most of her career to either teaching or founding organizations to improve the lives of low-income Black women in Washington, including the Iona R Whipper Home for Unwed

Mothers, which served women regardless of race, and was Washington DC's only maternity home that admitted Black women. It is still in operation today!

**May Edward Chinn**, 1896- 1980- As a renowned medical researcher for cancer detection, May Edward Chinn developed a protocol for cancer probability predictions using family medical history. She was also the first African American woman to graduate from Bellevue Hospital Medical College, as well as the first African American woman to intern at Harlem Hospital and be granted hospital privileges. She was an advocate for new methods of detecting cancer, and also an accomplished piano player who accompanied Paul Robeson for several years.

**Virginia Margaret Alexander**, 1899- 1949- Virginia Margaret Alexander was a physician and public health researcher who used her desire to elevate the African American community through improved health conditions to found the Aspiranto Health Home in 1931. The Aspiranto Health Home provided "socialized" health services to low-income African Americans in Philadelphia, often free of cost. Alexander dedicated her life to improving medical care for African American women, children, and families, many of whom otherwise would have been neglected. She publicized the racial disparities in health outcomes between Black and White patients at the time, such as Black babies dying at over twice the rate of White babies and Black patients dying of tuberculosis at over 6 times the rate of white patients. Her clinic not only served the underserved, but also allowed young physicians to get the experience they needed to establish their own community based practices.

**Faye Wattleton**, b. 1943- As an American abortion rights activist with a background in nursing and midwifery, Faye Wattleton went on to become the youngest president of the Planned Parenthood Federation of America in 1978, the first woman to hold the role since Margaret Sanger, and the first African American to hold the position. She pushed the organization to increase its range of healthcare services, and defended the agency as it faced political opposition from the Reagan Administration and the Religious Right. She is also a co-founder of a

quantum computer company and President for the Center for the Advancement of Women

**Nancy Boyd-Franklin**, *b. 1950*- Nancy Boyd-Franklin is a renowned psychologist and writer. Boyd-Franklin specializes in issues that affect Black families and communities, and she has been instrumental in creating new therapeutic approaches that address the mental health of Black Americans that also expand treatment options for this community. She has pioneered therapeutic approaches that address the intersections of issues that African American families face, including those that support families living with AIDS and folks living in inner cities. She spoke at the first White House Conference on AIDS,

**Deborah Prothrow-Stith**, *b. 1954*- Physician and innovator Deborah Prothrow-Stith pioneered the idea that violence should be seen as a public health problem and a social “disease” rather than a criminal justice problem, as well as the idea that violence needs a preventative approach. Her book ‘Deadly Consequences: How Violence is Destroying Our Teenage Population and a Plan to Begin Solving the Problem’ inspired folks in television to address the issue of violence in popular tv shows. Prothrow-Stith is also the current dean at the Charles R. Drew University College of Medicine in Los Angeles, and she was the first woman and youngest Commissioner of Public Health in Massachusetts.

**Mae Jemison**, *b. 1956*- Mae Jemison is an engineer, physician and former NASA astronaut, as well as the first Black woman to travel to space. She is also a trained physician who has contributed greatly to global health and development! She was the first African American woman to travel to space, has appeared on Star Trek: The Next Generation, and conducted medical studies in Cuba and in a Cambodian refugee camp, as well as working for Flying Doctors in East Africa, and as working as a medical officer with the Peace Corps in Liberia and Sierra Leone, and has worked with the Centers for Disease Control to support vaccine research.