

NYSIA JUNE 2025 SPRING WORKSHOP SPEAKERS



Dr. Nicholas Tolchin earned a Bachelor's degree in Biology and a Minor in Psychology from California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo, in 1999. He then went on to earn a PhD in Clinical Psychology, with a specialization in Neuropsychology, from the California School of Professional Psychology, Fresno Campus, in 2007. In the early stages of his career, Dr. Tolchin concentrated on providing forensic and neuropsychological treatment in correctional facilities across New York and New Jersey. He also gained valuable experience in skilled nursing and rehabilitation settings, offering neuropsychological and mental health treatment. In 2012, Dr. Tolchin transitioned to more specialized forensic work, initially conducting psychological evaluations for individuals applying for Social Security disability benefits. He then expanded his expertise to include parental fitness evaluations for the New Jersey family court system. By 2017, Dr. Tolchin began conducting forensic psychological and neuropsychological evaluations, as well as providing psychotherapy, primarily for Worker's Compensation insurance referrals, with a focus on trauma and traumatic brain injury cases. In 2021, Dr. Tolchin began conducting independent medical evaluations (IMEs), specializing in both psychological and neuropsychological assessments. The following year, Dr. Tolchin took on the role of Clinical Manager at Work Comp Psych Net, overseeing the quality assurance of psychological evaluations conducted by licensed consultants. He also provided case consultation and supervision for these professionals. In early 2024, Dr. Tolchin was appointed as the Clinical Director of WCPN, a PAX Health Company, where he continues to lead and shape the clinical direction of the organization.



Debra Doby is the Managing Partner of Wenderoff Law Group, APC, a law firm specializing in workers' compensation in New York, California and Florida. She specializes in guiding large, multi-state employers through the complexities of workers' compensation, empowering businesses to regain control over their workers' compensation processes. She is highly innovative, creating out of the box strategies to reduce risk, claims cost and close claims e.g. creation of 48 State Program to reduce prescription medication costs, cannabis usage program, construction fraud programs, early settlement program and PAR systems solutions. She is an adjunct professor of law and a frequent lecturer on workers' compensation and safety in the workplace.



Tracey McLean has nearly three decades of experience defending employers, insurance carriers, and third-party administrators in workers' compensation claims across New York State. During that time, she has authored numerous articles for industry publications, spoken at conferences on a variety of employer-related topics, and provided training seminars to assist employers and claims professional in navigating the complexities of the workers compensation system in New York. She has been named a Super Lawyer for multiple years in the area of workers compensation for Upstate New York. In addition to her practice, Tracey finds great satisfaction in serving her community through her involvement with several legal agencies and organizations, including her work as a Law Guardian in the Fourth Department representing and protecting the interests of children in legal proceedings; as a Pro Bono panelist of the Onondaga County Bar Association providing legal advice and assistance to victims of domestic violence; and as a board member of multiple non-profits in Central New York. Her work as an animal welfare advocate includes fostering, rescuing, and transporting neglected or abandoned animals across the northeast and Canada, and fundraising for their care. Most recently, she started a scholarship fund benefitting the girls of a remote village in Papua New Guinea, created in appreciation for the village's assistance with recovery of her grandfather, a pilot whose plane crashed near the village during a mission in WWII.



As Managing Partner of Jones Jones LLC, **Sarah Thomas** leads attorneys and clients alike through the evolving technicalities of workers' compensation and insurance defense law. She began her career working for the Special Funds Conservation Committee where she defended the Second Injury Fund and the Fund for Reopened Cases. Thereafter, she transitioned to an associate attorney position at Jones Jones LLC. As an associate, Sarah handled numerous claims from inception to closure before the NYS Workers' Compensation Board. In her current position as Managing Partner, she has launched many successful programs such as a settlement initiative that mitigated the cost of claims for several national clients. She has submitted several successful briefs to the Third Department on a variety of difficult workers' compensation matters. She travels cross-country speaking about emerging industry topics. Sarah serves on the Board of the Society of New York Workers' Compensation Bar Association, oversees settlement initiatives, and handles complex litigation pertaining to New York State construction law. Known as an attorney who embraces the use of multifaceted defense strategies, clients often seek Sarah's guidance when navigating complex claims. She has built a reputation as someone who is innovative and always in tune with the ever-changing issues in the world of NY workers' compensation.



Todd Baker Todd Baker, OTR/L, CEES, is Cofounder and Principal of Empowerment Ergonomics, an Ithaca, NY-based consulting firm specializing in ergonomics and work wellness services. Baker is also celebrating his 20th year as Lead Ergonomics Consultant for the Cornell University Musculoskeletal Injury Prevention Program. The Cornell University Musculoskeletal Injury Prevention Program provides ergonomics services for eligible faculty and staff. Baker and Empowerment Ergonomics coordinate the program as an integral member of the Medical Leaves and Accommodations teams, providing critical worksite evaluation data for managing disability and injury cases. Employees and departments can also directly request assessment and training services for proactive benefit. Empowerment Ergonomics has enhanced work environments and delivered custom training for 10,000+ Cornell staff and faculty since 2005. Todd Baker has presented internationally on multiple ergonomics topics, including: office, laboratory, hospitality, maintenance/building trades and work wellness programming. Empowerment Ergonomics supports regional employers with risk assessment, workplace accommodations, return-to work and design/procurement for improved worker performance and organizational success.



Julie Tennant got her start in workers' compensation nearly 25 years ago and has worked on the TPA and self-insured employer side, currently serving as the Manager of U.S. Medical Services and Workers' Compensation for Eastman Kodak Company. Julie supports having a robust transitional duty/return-to-work program in place and believes that getting injured employees re-engaged in the workplace as soon as possible is instrumental in ensuring a successful return to work. Julie enjoys participating in shenanigans, cooking, reading, and kayaking.



Timothy J. Kemperle is a Director Risk Management for UPS. Timothy joined UPS in 1984 as a Preloader and has held various positions within the organization over the past 40 years to include Operations, Human Resources, Health & Safety and Risk Management. He currently oversees Workers' Compensation and Auto Liability claims for East Zone. He is currently sits on the Board of the New York Self-Insures Association as well as a Director for New York Claims Association. He is a graduate of St. John's University with a BS in Management and a Master's Degree of Science in HR & Labor Relations from New York Institute of Technology.



Sheera Buckley is the Claim Specialist for Syracuse University. Sheera is the point of contact for all things workers' compensation at the University. She started her career at Syracuse University in 2002 managing the self insured and self administered New York State Disability Benefits program and acting as the back up for the workers' compensation position backup. In 2014 Sheera absorbed workers' compensation claims. She successfully implemented a transitional duty program, getting injured workers back to work faster, or keeping employees at work after suffering an on the job injury. Sheera has also worked to identify and eliminate administrative barriers in the claims process. Sheera earned a Bachelor of Arts in Anthropology from Syracuse University and maintains a Certified Leave Specialist designation. Sheera currently sits on the Board of Managers for the New York Self Insurers Association.



Erika Graham is the current Manager of Workers' Compensation Programs at The Port Authority of NY and NJ. Since obtaining her bachelor's degree from Saint John's University in May 1993, Erika has dedicated her career to the insurance industry in the Greater New York City area. Her training in the field of workers' compensation began in 1996 when Kemper Insurance brought her on board as a workers' compensation examiner. She has held positions with GEICO as a no-fault and liability examiner; then Zurich Insurance Company gave her the responsibility of handling high risk construction claims, including coverage verification responsibilities, lost time and complex cases involving catastrophic injuries. In 2010 she went to work for the third-party administrator Risk Management Planning Group as a Senior Claims Examiner. In 2013 Erika accepted a position as the Risk Manager for a consortium of more than ten nursing homes in the New York area. In 2014 Erika was hired by The Port Authority of New York and New Jersey as the Supervisor of their Workers' Compensation Program, overseeing both the Self-insured and OCIP projects as well as carrier claims. In 2019, she was promoted to Manager of the Workers' Compensation Programs. Erika is a member of the Board of Managers for the New York Self-Insurer's Association, the New Jersey Self-Insurers' Association, and New York Claims Association. She is licensed and credentialed as a New York State Independent Casualty Adjuster, Senior Claims Law Associate and Construction Risk Insurance Specialist.



Christopher Major is an experienced workers' compensation attorney who counsels and defends employers, insurance carriers and third-party administrators in workers' compensation matters throughout New Jersey and New York. He has been successful litigating claims from date of referral through closure, furnishing detailed legal action plans at case inception, managing court proceedings, deposing treating physicians and IME doctors on issues of causal relationship, medical necessity and permanency, and negotiating settlements and stipulations. Christopher has prosecuted reimbursement actions on behalf of workers' compensation carriers in New Jersey Superior Courts and New York Supreme Courts in a wide variety of matters including personal injury matters involving premises liability, products liability, New York Labor Law "Scaffold" claims, and general negligence; motor vehicle accident cases under New Jersey's "Verbal Threshold" and New York's "No-Fault" Law; actions against claimants after N.Y. WCL Section 114-a fraud findings; and motions/orders to show cause to enforce settlement agreements and litigants' rights. His subrogation work includes prosecuting claims for intercompany loss transfer, including filing and prosecuting loss transfer arbitration applications before Arbitration Forums, Inc. Christopher's experience with New York workers' compensation defense extends to litigation of demands from health insurers under the New York State Workers' Compensation Board's Health Insurance Matching Program (HIMP1), including preparing and serving formal objections, negotiating settlements when warranted, and appearing before the American Arbitration Association. Christopher has also defended claims under the Longshore & Harbor Workers' Compensation Act, including appearing for conferences and hearings before the U.S. Department of Labor, Office of Workers' Compensation Programs and Office of Administrative Law Judges. In addition to his extensive workers' compensation practice, Christopher has broad-based experience in civil litigation, insurance defense, personal injury and subrogation matters. He has participated in a number of alternative dispute resolution programs and handled settlement conferences, mediations and arbitrations.



Melissa Cunningham is a seasoned Vocational Forensic Expert and Vocational Division Manager with over two decades of experience at Managed Care Network, Inc. Since 1999, Melissa has been providing comprehensive evaluations of employability, job search efforts, earning capacity, and loss of earning capacity. She is well-versed in offering expert testimony on these outcomes and findings, particularly in areas such as workers' compensation, disability insurance, and personal injury. Her expertise extends to job development, labor market research, wage assessments, and individualized job placement assistance, all aimed at helping workers reintegrate into the workforce. Melissa is adept at ensuring that injured workers receive the support they need under the ADA to return to the labor market. She is committed to facilitating the return to work for injured workers, whether through reasonable accommodations with the at-injury employer or through alternate placements efforts with a new employer.

Before her current position, Melissa served as a Disability Services Coordinator and Mental Health Counselor at Columbus College of Art and Design, where she created the Disability Services Department and addressed legal compliance issues related to the ADA. She also coordinated classroom accommodations for students with disabilities. Additionally, Melissa held managerial roles in employment at The Children's Hospital of Buffalo and Mercy Hospital of Buffalo, where she facilitated injured workers' return to work with or without reasonable accommodations. Melissa holds a Master of Arts in Rehabilitation Counseling from The Ohio State University and a Bachelor of Arts in Psychology from the State University College at Buffalo. She is a Certified Rehabilitation Counselor (CRC) and a Certified Vocational Evaluator (CVE). Melissa is also an associate member of the American Board of Vocational Experts (ABVE) and a member of the International Association of Rehabilitation Professionals (IARP)



Paul Zaragoza is the Chief of the New York City Law Department's Workers' Compensation Division, where he has previously served as Assistant Corporation Counsel, Senior Counsel, and Deputy Chief. As Chief, Paul oversees the operation of a division that handles all aspects of claim management for the City of New York, a self-insured and self-administered employer of over 250,000 covered employees. This includes an annual volume of approximately 18,000 claims, 18,000 administrative hearings, and 300,000 medical bills with a total expenditure exceeding \$650 million. His efforts have been previously recognized with the Law Department's "Legal Rookie of the Year" award, as an NYC Bar Association Municipal Affairs Award nominee, and as recipient of the Edith Spivack Special Recognition Award for Exceptional Performance. Paul currently sits on the Workers' Compensation Board Advisory Committee for Self-Insurance, the Board of Managers for the New York Self-Insurers Association, and is a Director for the New York Claims Association. He has spoken on various topics for the NYSIA and has represented them prior to the promulgation of the 2018 Impairment Guidelines. Paul received his undergraduate degree from American University and his Juris Doctorate from the Maurice A. Deane School of Law at Hofstra University, where he served as the Managing Editor of the Journal of International Business and Law. He and his wife, Laura, are proud parents to two wonderful children: Nuala and Ronan.