

Date: 06/23/2026 10:32 PM EDT Subject: Honoring America's Conscience:

[The PuLSE Institute](#)

[Honoring America's Conscience: PuLSE Announces 2026 Civil Rights Leadership Dinner Honorees](#)

By **thepulseinstitute** on June 23, 2026

Distinguished National Leaders, Innovators, Advocates and Community Champions to be Recognized at Detroit Athletic Club

The PuLSE Institute, the national anti-poverty and economic justice think tank based in Detroit, today announced the distinguished honorees for its 2026 Civil Rights Leadership Dinner, one of Michigan's premier gatherings celebrating leadership, justice, civic engagement, economic opportunity, and the enduring pursuit of the American promise.

The dinner will be held on **Wednesday, July 29, 2026, at 5:30 p.m.** at the historic **Detroit Athletic Club** in downtown Detroit. This year's theme is: "**The Promise of America: Advancing Justice, Expanding Opportunity, Sustaining Hope.**"

The 2026 honorees represent extraordinary achievement across business, public service, civil rights advocacy, entrepreneurship, community transformation, and democratic leadership.

The honorees are:



Gary Torgow

Chairman, Huntington National Bank

Founder's Medal of Conscience and Justice

A respected business leader and philanthropist whose commitment to economic inclusion, civic responsibility, and community investment has strengthened institutions and expanded opportunity throughout Michigan and beyond. Torgow is also serving as the Chairman of the 2026 Civil Rights Leadership Dinner.



Jim Vincent

Former President, Providence NAACP

Guardian of Democracy and Economic Justice Award

A tireless civil rights advocate whose decades of leadership have advanced voting rights, economic empowerment, racial justice, and civic participation, making him one of the most respected voices in the struggle for equality and democratic accountability.



Sarah Noet

Global Entrepreneur and Innovator, Seattle

Innovation, Entrepreneurship and Opportunity Award

An internationally recognized entrepreneur whose leadership and innovation have demonstrated how creativity, enterprise, and visionary thinking can create pathways of opportunity and economic advancement across communities and industries.



Robert Weiner

Former White House Spokesman

Conscience of Democracy Award

A distinguished public servant, commentator, and advocate whose career has been defined by an unwavering commitment to democratic values, public accountability, and informed civic discourse.



Gwen Swanigan

Benton Harbor Community Activist

Community Transformation Award

A courageous grassroots leader whose advocacy and community engagement have helped elevate the voices of residents, strengthen neighborhoods, and advance equity and opportunity in Benton Harbor and throughout Southwest Michigan.



Samantha Woll (Posthumously)

Former President, Isaac Agree Downtown Detroit Synagogue

Bridge Builder Award

The late Samantha Woll will be honored posthumously for her extraordinary commitment to bringing people together across lines of faith, culture, and background. Her life embodied the values of compassion, civic engagement, and community-building that remain urgently needed in America today.

"The PuLSE Institute's Civil Rights Leadership Dinner is about more than honoring accomplished individuals," said **Bankole Thompson**, Founder and Chairman of The PuLSE Institute, nationally acclaimed journalist, author, and standard-bearer for economic justice issues.

"It is about recognizing those who have expanded the boundaries of opportunity, strengthened the foundations of democracy, and demonstrated through their actions that justice remains a living responsibility. This year's honorees remind us that the promise of America is not self-executing. It requires courageous leadership, moral imagination, and an enduring commitment to the common good."

Thompson added:

"At a time when democratic institutions are being tested and many communities continue to struggle for economic fairness and inclusion, these honorees stand as examples of what principled leadership can accomplish. Their work affirms that hope is not passive optimism but a disciplined commitment to building a more just society."

Attorney Tina M. Patterson, Esq., President and General Counsel of The PuLSE Institute and a nationally recognized legal authority, said the 2026 honorees reflect the organization's mission of advancing economic justice, civic engagement, and community empowerment.

"Each of these individuals has made a profound contribution to strengthening communities, expanding opportunity, and advancing the ideals that define a healthy democracy," Patterson said. "Their leadership demonstrates that meaningful change is achieved when vision is paired with service, and when influence is used to uplift others. We are honored to celebrate their achievements and the impact they continue to have on countless lives."

The 2026 Civil Rights Leadership Dinner follows a distinguished tradition of honoring transformative leaders whose work has helped shape the moral trajectory of the nation. Last year's honoree was civil

rights titan, the late **Rev. Dr. Bernard LaFayette Jr.**, who received The PuLSE Institute's **Global Civil Rights Leadership Award**.

A close associate of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and one of the principal architects of the American Civil Rights Movement, Dr. LaFayette was among the first national leaders invited to serve on The PuLSE Institute's National Advisory Board. His enduring legacy of nonviolent social change, democratic participation, and moral courage continues to inspire the Institute's mission and the leaders it recognizes today.

"To be selected for The PuLSE Institute's Innovation, Entrepreneurship and Opportunity Award is one of the great honors of my life, and one I will carry with deep humility and gratitude," said Noet, the Seattle-based entrepreneur. "Through the *Be The Change Global Goals Initiative*, our work intersects sport, education, and technology. We use the universal language of the game to provide real opportunity to young people, especially those in under-resourced communities the world too often overlooks. This journey has been life-changing for me in every sense. It has stretched my faith, tested my resolve, and shown me again and again that humanity has the power to rewrite what we thought was possible."

She added, "To see my name alongside such extraordinary leaders, in the lineage of the late Rev. Dr. Bernard Lafayette Jr., is humbling beyond words. I am grateful to God, to my family and partners, and to everyone who believed in this work before there was proof. I receive this honor not as a destination, but as a charge: to keep making a difference for the communities and the next generation still waiting for their chance to thrive."

Benton Harbor's champion for equity, Swanigan equally celebrated the recognition.

"I am truly honored and humbled to accept this recognition from The PuLSE Institute. My work is truly rooted in serving others, advocating for youth and families, and creating opportunities for our community to strive and to thrive. To have these efforts acknowledged is deeply meaningful and encouraging. This recognition serves as a powerful reminder that positive change is possible when we remain committed to equity, justice, and community empowerment," Swanigan said. "I am especially touched by the acknowledgment of grassroots leadership because that is where I believe transformation begins. It begins with ordinary people who care enough to act, who refuse to give up, and who continue to show up even in the face of opposition and when the work gets difficult. Thank you for this incredible honor."

Former White House spokesman, Weiner, underscored the importance of the award at a time of uncertainty.

"I am humbled by The PuLSE Institute honoring me with the Conscience of Democracy Award," Wiener said. "I am proud to have chipped in in my small ways to this giant national need to address issues affecting the nation including minorities, those of the lower income, and the oppressed in our society. With Cong. Ed Koch, we limited the rental prices in federal housing for lower incomes. With Chairman Claude Pepper for the House Aging Committee, we protected benefits for minority elderly and expanded home health care as an alternative to nursing homes in both Medicare and Medicaid."

"With Congressmen Charles Rangel and Detroit's great John Conyers, we fought against police brutality of Black people and other minorities and exposed disproportionate arrests, imprisonment, and murders

of minorities -all still a very active issue in the discriminatory criminal justice system, and for jobs for all. With Sen. Ted Kennedy, we joined in pressing his fight for national health insurance, an attempted predecessor of the Affordable Care Act. With 4-Star General and US Drug Czar Barry McCaffrey at the White House and as a spokesman there, we fought for and achieved a doubling of treatment, prevention, and education about drug addiction and especially fought for benefits for minorities and lower income.”

He added, " Obviously now, these efforts are needed even more. Let's keep it going. We now have the ongoing vehicle of our op-ed writing program at the National Press Club where we won the President's Award for recruiting young journalists as co-bylined writers and have published over 1100 op-eds in major media to date. Your award gives me and all of us an enormous incentive!”

Vincent from Rhode Island echoed similar sentiments.

"I am more than proud and honored to receive the **Guardian of Democracy and Economic Justice Award** from America's Anti-Poverty Think Tank, the PuLSE Institute, an organization that sits at the center of the national fight for economic and racial justice,” Vincent said. " To receive such a distinguished award from the very organization that honored the late, great Bernard Lafayette Jr., last year at a ceremony, which also celebrated his last birthday is extremely humbling and so very much appreciated. This honor belongs to everyone in the state of Rhode Island who joined me for years in the fight for racial and economic justice as well as in our bold and successful push to get the first Black justice nominated to the Rhode Island Supreme Court as well as the City of Providence initiating efforts towards the all-important issue of reparatory justice among countless other efforts.”

Drs. Douglas and Margo Woll, the parents of Samantha Woll, the late Detroit Jewish leader, who championed inclusion will attend the Dinner to receive the award on behalf of their daughter.

"Our family is incredibly grateful to The PuLSE Institute for honoring our beloved daughter and sister, Samantha Woll, of blessed memory, with this year’s Bridge Builder Award. Samantha was a true social justice warrior, in every sense of the word. She was a powerful advocate for improving interfaith relations, fostering cross-cultural understanding and engaging in serious dialogue irrespective of one’s political or philosophical viewpoints. Samantha’s passion for helping the underserved and the disenfranchised led her to promote fairer housing, health and transportation policies, and anti-poverty solutions. She did this as both an individual and as part of many political campaigns,” the family said in a statement. "Her strong Jewish identify and Judaic values led her to establish and lead multiple interdenominational coalitions including Black-Jewish, Muslim-Jewish and Hindu-Jewish groups and annual celebrations. She was a confidant, companion and colleague to all, especially those exposed to life’s unpredictable trajectory.”

They added, " Samantha was tragically murdered in Detroit at age 40 while serving as the President of the Isaac Agree Downtown Synagogue, the only remaining physical synagogue in the city of Detroit. She is greatly missed by her family, friends and everyone who ever knew her.”

The PuLSE Institute's Civil Rights Leadership Dinner brings together leaders from business, government, education, philanthropy, labor, faith communities, and the nonprofit sector to recognize excellence in leadership and to advance conversations about justice, opportunity, and the future of democratic society.