The Colorado Health Foundation™

Dr. Lilia Cervantes Receives the Dr. Virgilio Licona Community Health Leadership Award for Her Long-standing Commitment to Health Equity and Social Justice

The Colorado Health Foundation's Dr. Virgilio Licona Community Health Leadership Award Program Honors Distinguished Colorado Community- and Systems-Level Leaders

DENVER, CO – The Colorado Health Foundation is pleased to announce Dr. Lilia Cervantes as the recipient of the 2021 Dr. Virgilio Licona Community Health Leadership Award. Named after the late Dr. Virgilio Licona, this award program recognizes one Coloradan annually who demonstrates distinguished leadership in the communities they serve and in the systems they are working to disrupt.

Dr. Cervantes' lived experience and long-standing, equity-driven career makes her a critical leader on the forefront of community- and systems-level change. Her life's work centers on addressing structural racism, eliminating unnecessary and systemically-caused health barriers, and advocating for Coloradans who experience the greatest needs.

Notably, Dr. Cervantes is recognized for spearheading the change to a Medicaid payment rule so undocumented patients with kidney failure can access live-saving maintenance dialysis. This effort came after the passing of a patient named Hilda,

who was ineligible for Medicaid due to her undocumented status and therefore unable to receive regular life-saving dialysis treatments. Dr. Cervantes describes this experience as her sentinel event, in which she realized she could use her lens and power as a Latinx physician to engage in advocacy and policy development.

"We cannot ignore the plight for health and health justice for our Latinx community," said Dr. Lilia Cervantes, Associate Professor in the Department of Medicine and Office of Research at Denver Health Medical Center and the University of Colorado Anschutz Medical Campus. "I have learned that every problem can be an opportunity. In the world of health policy, the fight is not always won by the loudest voice. It is won by those who do not give up."

Since this significant health policy improvement, she has removed other barriers and advanced equity for the Latinx community, focusing on improving the quality and cultural-responsiveness of care for individuals with end-stage kidney disease. Dr. Cervantes' work to test community-based interventions to improve the well-being of Latinx individuals with kidney disease is funded by the National Institutes of Health and the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation.

Her established leadership at systems- and community-levels has undoubtedly created lasting impact – and her work continues. Since emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic, Dr. Cervantes pivoted priorities and responded to urgent community needs by:

- Providing clinical care as an internal medicine hospitalist to patients hospitalized with COVID-19 at Denver Health.
- Conducting multiple studies focused on the Latinx community and COVID-19, which documented the disparate experiences and harm faced by the Latinx community, while continuing to advocate for just access to care and resources. These studies informed public health programs in Colorado and nationwide. A current study is looking at changes in vaccine deliberation

following hospitalization for COVID-19 among Latinx unvaccinated individuals.

- Connecting with community-based and health policy stakeholders to advocate for access to outpatient COVID-19 care for undocumented Coloradans. The Colorado Department of Health Care Policy and Financing modified its Emergency Medicaid to include outpatient COVID-19 care for undocumented Coloradans.
- Providing guidance and launching community-based COVID-19 response programs – one of which supports community health workers by providing culturally and linguistically appropriate and accurate COVID-19 information. In addition, she is participating in two taskforces: the Colorado's Champions for Vaccine Equity Initiative administered by the Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment and Colorado Vaccine Equity Taskforce administered by Immunize Colorado.

Dr. Cervantes continues to demonstrate a distinguished pattern of service and advocacy for the Latinx, immigrant and refugee, and undocumented communities. In addition to her health policy, research and community-based efforts, she is dedicated to lifting up emerging Latinx health leaders. In 2009, she launched the Healthcare Interest Program at Denver Health in partnership with the University of Colorado Anschutz Medical Campus. She is actively involved in mentoring students in various levels of health care training to ensure their success, and continues to mentor students who have advanced to health programs and are conducting research and advocacy work at the Anschutz Medical Campus.

"The work that Dr. Cervantes has poured her passion into demonstrates that those closest to the problem are also closest to the solution," said Karen McNeil-Miller, President and CEO of The Colorado Health Foundation. "We couldn't be more inspired by her spirit of social justice, her unrelenting advocacy for the Latinx community and her steadfast fight to break down barriers that keep health

out of reach.”

The Dr. Virgilio Community Health Leadership Award honors impassioned Coloradans who are finding innovative and effective strategies to overcoming health barriers within Colorado. It was design to recognize community health leaders leading impactful efforts to advance social justice and health improvements for Coloradans who have historically had less power and/or privilege.

Dr. Cervantes will join family, friends, mentors and Foundation staff at an award reception in the spring of 2022 – recognizing her outstanding leadership to advance health and health equity in Colorado. In honor of Dr. Cervantes receipt of this award, the Foundation has made $20,000 in donations to Colorado-based nonprofits of her choice.

Learn more about the program and the late Dr. Virgilio Licona.

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