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Housing Justice Centered in 2021 Health Equity Ambassadors Selections

As COVID-19 continues to hit Black, Brown and Indigenous communities, grassroots organizers and advocates recognized for their key role in protecting health and homes

OAKLAND, Calif. — Recognizing the inextricable connection between housing and health, made more evident by the COVID-19 pandemic, 19 housing justice leaders were announced today as the [2021 cohort of Ambassadors for Health Equity](#), a venture led by PolicyLink and supported by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. These leaders, who are focused on building political power and housing solutions in Black, Brown and Indigenous communities will work together as a cohort to infuse health equity in housing justice work at the local, state, and national levels.

This fellowship creates a platform for leaders from outside the health field to share ideas and experiences, forge new alliances, and collaborate around promoting health equity in their work. During the one-year program, the 19 Ambassadors will leverage and learn from each other's expertise, align around a vision for housing and health equity, and propel their work collectively toward more power in the housing justice movement.

The COVID-19 pandemic has laid bare the nexus between protecting health and having a secure place to call home, and revealed the pronounced disparities in both for Black, Brown and Indigenous people due to generations of government neglect in ensuring housing security.

"We must begin to set right the generations of divestment from Black, Brown, and Indigenous communities and ensure everyone in America has a safe, affordable place to live," said Michael McAfee, President and CEO of PolicyLink. "We are proud to support these leaders as they bring to bear multi-faceted solutions centered in the wisdom and priorities of their communities."

Following the housing market boom and bust of the 2008 recession, efforts to recover the market were prioritized over the health and well-being of communities hit hardest in the recession. Over the last decade, this trajectory continued making homes increasingly unaffordable; the housing market became even more unstable for renter households, which account for 37 percent of all households nationwide. Even before the pandemic, 50 percent of renter households paid more than one-third of their income for housing, leaving little for other necessities, such as utilities, groceries, and medical bills – a growing problem as unemployment has reached Depression-era levels.

This year's Ambassadors represent different approaches to housing justice, including grassroots organizing, civil rights advocacy, cultural housing development and community land ownership. They

have worked on developing and enacting strong protections to endure through the COVID-19 recovery. This includes bans on evictions, rent and mortgage forgiveness tied to relief for affordable housing providers and small landlords, and housing first for people without access to safe and healthy shelter.

“The COVID-19 pandemic and economic crisis have made plain how issues of race intersect with health, wealth, and housing,” said Lisa Rice, President and CEO of the National Fair Housing Alliance, and an advisor to the Ambassadors program. “We cannot achieve health equity without eliminating racism and ensuring that fair housing is a reality for everyone.”

The fellowship experience is guided by six equity experts, who include Seema Agnani of National CAPACD, Tiffany Clarke of FSG, Saneta deVuono-powell of GroundWorks Consulting, Paul Lumley of Native American Youth and Family Services, Dalila Madison Almquist of Public Health Institute, Dawn Phillips of Right to the City Alliance, and Lisa Rice of the National Fair Housing Alliance. Together, they provide mentorship, strategic direction, and curriculum content for the program.

“Working toward health equity enables us to envision our real potential as individuals and communities, and recognize the value of all components of a healthy life – from artistic expression to fresh air to a stable and safe home,” said Seema Agnani, Executive Director of National CAPACD, and advisor for the 2021 Amambassadors.

“These ambassadors share a common vision for housing justice, and bring diverse lived experiences and beliefs on how to achieve that vision,” said Uma Viswanathan, senior program officer for the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. “This program brings them into relationship with one another, so they can harness their collective wisdom and grapple with tensions to reimagine a system of healthy housing for all.”

Learn more about the 2021 Ambassadors for Health Equity at plcylk.org/ahe2021

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