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# The Powerful Pathways of Diverse San Francisco Bay Area Community Health Leaders

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation's (RWJF) Community Health Leaders (CHL) Program offers a rare opportunity to recognize innovative leaders who have made extraordinary contributions to increasing access to quality health care and improving health outcomes at the community level. Under the auspices of the RWJF New Connections Program, the RWJF Human Capital Portfolio Team commissioned this evaluation study of its Community Health Leaders Program. This evaluation report highlights the results of a qualitative study that drew data from a leadership dialogue circle, biographical interviews of the nine San Francisco (SF) Bay Area CHL award recipients, and background document reviews. The report analyzed the influential forces and defining events that shaped CHLs' path to leadership and was guided by a framework for analysis that incorporates "critical life maps" or "leadership pathways."

## FORMATIVE EXPERIENCES AND KEY INFLUENCES

CHLs' key influences and formative experiences stem from their parents' influences in their upbringing. CHLs can track the origins of their community health leadership work back to their early devotion to community service. In addition, living abroad or immigrating to the United States deepened CHLs' capacity to navigate linguistic, social and cultural differences and increased their commitment to diverse communities in need. Powerful youth programs and inspiring mentors in higher education also created deep inroads in CHLs' understanding of the issues and their ability to address them. Finally, coming of age during the Civil Rights Movement provided a critical backdrop for real life learning as well as the critical, catalytic events that helped several CHLs overcome adversity and find their inner strength.

The genesis of the philosophy, knowledge, understanding, and remarkable skills that CHLs possess undoubtedly came from their formative experiences and mentors. In turn, they have been able to capitalize on these opportunities to further themselves, question their assumptions, find meaning in their role in the world, and make definitive contributions to improved community health in ways that no others have done before them.

## KEY ACCOMPLISHMENTS, CHALLENGES, AND LESSONS LEARNED

This group of CHLs boasts many inspiring and remarkable accomplishments. Through their work, CHLs have been able to shift society's understanding of an issue; develop and implement innovative program models to improve access to health services or promote health; affect policy changes; and build strong organizations as vehicles for delivering and sustaining community health work.

CHLs have achieved before they received the award and continue to achieve after the award. Their longevity in the community health arena shows that these are truly great leaders, who have demonstrated repeated superior performance. They have made

distinctive impacts on their communities and are constantly striving to achieve *lasting endurance*. Their breakthroughs and victories are remarkable in that they have encountered enormous challenges which fall into several major categories: (1) believing in self and own leadership abilities, (2) staying true to self and community needs; (3) maintaining organizational focus and cutting edge; (4) being effective collaborators; (5) effectively working with public agencies and political processes, and (6) preparing for lasting endurance.

#### IMPACT OF AWARD

The leaders' arrival into legitimate power and greatness was meaningfully punctuated when they received the Community Health Leaders Award. For many of these "unsung heroes," receiving this prominent award by a distinguished national foundation gave them a new lease on life and a credibility and financial boost to their work on the ground. While these leaders would have continued with their remarkable work regardless, they describe the award as impacting their leadership trajectory in many different ways, including personal impact on them as leaders, skill building, networking, organizational impacts, and leveraging of the award in organizational development and programmatic work.

#### RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the success of the program and our analysis, following are some recommendations for consideration:

- *Continue or expand networking, peer exchanges, and more structured site visits to each other's programs and organizations.*
- *Find ways to recognize the collective nature of leadership beyond individual leaders.*
- *Maintain commitment to grassroots leaders or people doing grassroots work.*
- *Place a greater emphasis on a mix of policy and direct community service.*
- *Incorporate CHL program philosophy into the rest of RWJF funding portfolio.*
- *Support the field of community health to prepare for comprehensive leadership succession.*

#### CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the leadership pathways of Bay Area Community Health Leaders are truly unique, inspiring and hold many lessons for future generations. From early childhood into their adulthood, the CHLs were molded by experiences that created a **moral conscience** that has defined their greatness and longevity. The essence of these leaders' conscience is through sacrifice to achieve their asset-based vision of community health. They inspire others to become part of a cause worthy of their commitment. They teach others that the ends and means are inseparable because without authentic community engagement, the results are meaningless. The CHLs emphasize that through being in deep relationships with

communities, they can transform passion into compassion. In the end, it is the Community Health Leaders' humility, openness to learning, ability listening, tireless devotion to community's betterment that truly define their greatness and lasting endurance.

**Figure 1. Critical Leadership Pathway Map**



**Figure 2. Logic Model for Evaluating Diverse Leadership Pathways**

