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INSPIRE AWARDS

Inspire Awards: Sandra Hernández is on a mission to get quality health care for all Californias

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Editor's note: As part of our Most Influential Women in Bay Area Business publication, we are pleased to introduce this year's Inspire Award winners — three Bay Area female leaders who have been champions of issues surrounding diversity, equity, accessibility and inclusion. All three work to make their companies boards and industries more inclusive and support the next generation of women leaders as mentors. Click here and here to read about our other honorees.

Dr. Sandra Hernández is committed to getting quality health care to all Californians. As president and CEO of the Oakland-based California Health Care Foundation — a nonprofit dedicated to improving equitable access to quality health care for all individuals across the state — Hernández works tirelessly to advocate for underserved communities.

In 2019, she was tapped by Gov. Gavin Newsom to serve on the Healthy California for All Commission, which has been tasked with developing a streamlined system for delivering quality care via a unified financing system. She previously served as CEO of the San Francisco Foundation and was assistant clinical professor of medicine at the University of California, San Francisco. Hernández



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Dr. Sandra Hernandez, President & CEO, California Health Care Foundation poses for a portrait in San Francisco on Monday, September 27, 2021.

spoke to me about leading through an unprecedented time that has exposed some of the greatest challenges facing the health care industry.



I read an article you published in May titled “We’re all in this together” where you made the point that undocumented immigrants comprise the largest segment of Californians without health insurance. What do you see a tangible first step to address this problem? This is one of our ongoing goals, to make sure that everybody gets covered in the state. Keep in mind that there are also people who are eligible for Medi-Cal who aren’t yet enrolled because they’re concerned about who will get that information and whether it will impede legal residents’ ability to get permanent residency.

The goal of getting everybody in the tent for insurance has never been more important as we face this pandemic. We also need to recognize that we have an array of federally qualified clinics throughout the state, including in rural and agricultural areas that provide care to people who are uninsured. California has embraced the ACA and expanded Medicare, but until we get everybody covered, we’re not done on that journey.

Tell me about your work on the Healthy California for All Commission. It’s still underway. I was appointed by Governor Newsom to this commission that has appointees from different

organizations, and it is still meeting and developing a roadmap to make sure everybody has health care, and that we simplify and integrate care because our system is incredibly fragmented.

The goal is to create simplification and administrative ease and to make sure that at no point is health care unaffordable, especially for low-income Californians.

How have women supported your career either as mentors or role models? A lot of women in public health today inspire me — especially women health directors who find themselves in front of the media, making sense out of health care data and trying to do right by the public. We have a lot of women in those roles, and they inspire me.

A lot of the women caregivers during the early days of the HIV epidemic before we knew how the virus was transmitted were caring for gay men who were dying. The courage of people to everyday step forward to do the right thing inspired me. I've been lucky to work alongside them.

As we're approaching our second year of battling Covid, many women health care workers are on the front line, leaving their kids at home and going to work every day and they all inspire me.

Have you seen significant change in how diversity, equity, inclusion, belonging and accessibility is addressed in health care? Regardless of sector, we have a lot of work to do. It's certainly true in the health care sector.

I think that the most compelling reason for being deliberate around inclusiveness is in decision making, policymaking and resource allocation. Decisions made in boardrooms are better the more diverse the room.

In public policy, you shouldn't try to design a system without having the users at its center. And that's true whether you're talking about people with disabilities or chronic mental illness or you're addressing climate change.

Our health care workforce in California doesn't remotely look like the population in California. That's a missed opportunity and I think the sector recognizes that if we don't address it, we will continue to see unforgiving health inequities.

Do you see it more as a pipeline issue or in hiring practices, or a combination of both? It's not a pipeline issue — we have very talented young people that come from all different racial and ethnic backgrounds and that speak multiple languages. What we have is the lack of opportunity, and lack of enough reach and placement for those folks to step into leadership roles.

There are bottlenecks all through the system, but we have a lot of talent in this state. It's our job to create opportunities wherever we can. Everybody ought to be thinking about how we expand opportunities for the talent that we have in the state because it's enormous and it's untapped. And we leave it by the wayside at our own peril.

How have you balanced work and life during this prolonged

pandemic? One of the most important things leaders need to do is to attend to the emotional and well-being needs of their workforce. That support can manifest in different ways — making sure people take time off, allowing people to vent about uncertainty, expressing optimism for the future. I am optimistic that we'll pull through this.

There's a lot we need to learn coming out of this pandemic. You have to attend to people's sense of well-being and how they're managing the chronic and persistent stress that Covid has brought to the lives of our communities and especially families and communities with limited resources. When you have limited resources, or you live alone or you're isolated, or you have a preexisting physical or mental condition, this pandemic has just been really punishing.

What do you see as the biggest challenge to address in your role

at the California Health Care Foundation? Behind this pandemic will be an epidemic of mental illness. One out of 500 Americans have died due to Covid. Think about how many people who have lost a loved one. How many orphans, how many rituals that have been forgone — funerals, weddings, etc. — things that bond us culturally and emotionally to family and coworkers have been disrupted.

One of the most important things is to regain trust in the institutions of public and civic life. If we don't have rituals and can't gather with family, and there is no institution that is stable and doing the right thing for the right reason, then we're in big trouble. There's an element of reestablishing trust that must be done, and leadership matters incredibly to be able to do that.

We're still living through some degree of uncertainty. I make monthly updates on Covid to my staff and my last slide is always showing what we still don't know. I include here's what we thought three months ago that we now know is wrong. You have to be able to say that so people have confidence that what you're saying is the best information you have in the moment.

We are struggling with the notion that people are free to spread Covid and that it's somehow a personal freedom that supersedes what our community responsibilities are to each other, our families and our coworkers. We need to recognize that nobody lives on an island. The actions that we take need to be on behalf of our neighbors, communities and coworkers, and not solely based on individual personal liberty.

That sounds so idealistic, sadly. As a country, regardless of political persuasion, degree of education, race, ethnicity, industry, etc. I would argue that we have a collective responsibility to do that. And people do things when they're stressed out that they might not otherwise do. And we will come out of this pandemic. I think that a sense of civic unity and community responsibility for each other is something we're going to have to intentionally work at.

What drives you every day? I'm fortunate. The work I do is meaningful, and there's never been more attention on both public

health and health care than there is today. We spend 18% of our GDP on health care. We were not well prepared for this pandemic, in spite of the fact one has been predicted. I have the opportunity to work in a state that cares about health and about health care. The work that the foundation does has an incredible staff that's oriented to its mission with an extraordinary board. I get up every day with purpose.

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