



# Meeting the Moment: How CBOs Led the COVID-19 Response in Fresno County

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# Introduction

**Purpose:** Highlight the health equity leaders involved with the Fresno Building Healthy Communities (BHC) Coalition and who helped develop the Immigrant and Refugee Coalition's (IRC) COVID-19 Equity Project (CEP). Their leadership in navigating the sociopolitical barriers to establishing and sustaining the Community Health Worker model powered by community-based organizations (CBOs).

## Key Informants: Three Health Equity Leaders

- Sandra Celedon
- Genoveva Islas
- Tania Pacheco-Werner



# Sandra Celedon: President and CEO of Fresno Building Healthy Communities

## Personal Background:

- Celedon migrated from Mexico as a young child and credits Calwa as an inspiration for her work

## Career Background

- Current President and CEO of Fresno BHC
- Before joining Fresno BHC, she served as a manager for outreach and enrollment programs at Clinica Sierra Vista

## Career Highlights

- Health and Human Services Hero by Fresno State
- Champions for Equity Award
- Shared CEP outcomes at the invitation of the White House and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's Summit on COVID-19 Equity and "What Works" Showcase



# Genoveva Islas: Founder and Executive Director of Cultiva la Salud

## Personal Background:

- Genoveva Islas was born in Fresno, California
- She became the first in her family to attend and graduate from college with an advanced degree

## Career Background:

- Advocate for community health
- Led the Central California Regional Obesity Prevention Program
- She served on influential boards and currently contributes to the Fresno Unified School District School Board

## Career Highlights

- Recognized as a Health and Human Services Hero, 2021
- Culture of Health Leader by the acclaimed Robert Wood Johnson Foundation



# Tania Pacheco-Werner: Director at the Central Valley Health Policy Institute at Fresno State



## Personal Background

- Tania Pacheco was born in Mexico and moved to the US at a young age
- Adapting to a new country brought a lot of challenges which she was able to overcome

## Career Background

- Director of Central Valley Health Policy Institute (CVHPI)
- Focused on studying problems that affect community health

## Career Highlights

- Woman of the Year for the 31st Assembly District in 2022
- Educator of the Year in the College Category by the Mexican American Education Association in 2022

# Covid Equity Project and Theory of Change

**Theory of Change (TOC):** Building power and voice of those who have historically been excluded; create an “inclusive democracy and close health equity gaps”

The CEP's structure reflects BHC's TOC

- Systems and practice change focus
- CEP implemented an approach prioritized by Fresno BHC:  
**meet people where they are**

# Community Health Worker Model to Address COVID-19

The CEP utilized a CHW model known as the Promotora Model to:

- Improve healthcare access for **immigrants, refugees, and undocumented** residents.
- Provide **support services** for underserved and hard-to-reach populations



Community members who come from the same background as the communities they were trying to serve were trained as CHWs

# Addressing Inequities: Socio-political and Historical Challenges

- Integrating the CEP structure into existing city and county government agencies was challenging at the decision-making level
- The IRC secured **\$12 million** in funding for the implementation of the CEP model; however, they were not able to retain control of:
  - how the program operated
  - who would lead the work while working with County governing bodies



# Addressing Inequities: Socio-political and Historical Challenges

- The IRC faced structural biases and structural barriers from the board of supervisors despite their years of experience
  - Their professional experience was downplayed by the board of supervisors

# Addressing Inequities: Socio-political and Historical Challenges

- Initially, Fresno BHC was not appointed as the fiscal agent
- As the program continued, Fresno BHC took over this role
- Fresno BHC went on to become the fiscal agent, supported by years of experience and expertise in such a role

# Addressing Inequities: Sociopolitical and Historical Challenges

*“Ultimately, the desire is there [to embed the CHW model]. Even if you're giving our model to somebody else, it tells me you want to implement a model that prioritizes health equity and that's half the battle,”*

**- Sandra Celedon, Fresno BHC's CEO**

# Addressing Inequities: Sociopolitical and Historical Challenges

- Difficulties in getting an agreement from local government bodies had to do with how the CEP challenged old systems used to address community health
- These old systems produce and reproduce inequities in community health outcomes

# Addressing Inequities: Sociopolitical and Historical Challenges

- CEP is a **novel approach** and it is disruptive to the way things have been historically done by
  - investing in community
  - redesigning the role of the community as experts
  - focusing on engaging the community to be part of the solution

# Conclusion: The CEP and Shaping a New CHW Model

CEP has been incredibly successful:

- Praised by Governor's office as a solution to addressing pandemic-related challenges
  - Resulted in the dispensing of thousands of COVID-19 tests, vaccinations, and multilingual information throughout Fresno County

# Conclusion: The CEP and Shaping a New CHW Model

CEP has been incredibly successful:

- Has been replicated in Monterey and Santa Cruz Counties
- Has become a launch pad for CBOs to expand their health equity work through new funders
- Has laid the foundation for new programs that center around health equity and utilize the CHW model

# Thank you!

For more information, visit  
Central Valley Health Policy Institute at  
[CVHPI.ORG](http://CVHPI.ORG)

