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RUHS-Public Health honors five 'Community Champions' for their service to Riverside County residents

Each year, Riverside University Health System—Public Health honors five individuals or partner organizations with its Public Health Champion awards.

The five winners have contributed to improving the health and well-being of Riverside County residents and will be recognized during the April 2 Board of Supervisors meeting in Riverside to kick off National Public Health Week (April 1-8).

“These individuals and organizations have stepped up and gone beyond what would normally be expected of them,” said Kim Saruwatari, director of Riverside University Healthcare System – Public Health, which hands out the award. “They have seen the importance of giving back to the community and their efforts have benefitted many residents. We are honored to give them this much-deserved recognition.”

The five recipients represent the five supervisorial districts and were selected for their dedication to improving the health status of Riverside County residents; collaboration with Public Health and/or other organizations focused on public and population health; and because of their sensitivity to the needs of special populations and reducing health disparities in care and outcomes.

In addition to the awards presentation, Dr. Cameron Kaiser, public health officer for the county, will give a “State of the County’s Health” address. A Health Expo is also planned between 8:30 a.m. and 12:30 p.m. at the County Administrative Center, 4080 Lemon St. in Riverside. More than 20 vendors will participate and there will be health screenings for blood pressure and glucose.

The following is a list of winners:

District 1: Riverside Food System Alliance: The Riverside Food System Alliance (RFSA) supports local food and agriculture for a healthier community and building sustainable local farm-to-fork and back-to-farm economy. RFSA and the Riverside Food Co-op were awarded a grant from the California Department of Resources Recycling and Recovery to innovate the Riverside Food Waste Prevention and Food Rescue Initiative, which offers tools and training for the community to encourage food waste prevention and food rescue activities. RFSA has supported farmer training, connected growers to farmland, connected restaurateurs to farmers, prevented food waste and supported community gardens.

District 2: Vonya Quarles: Quarles is co-founder of Starting Over Inc., a CBO specializing in providing transitional housing and reentry services while helping to build strong communities through recovery, civic engagement and leadership development. Her partnership with public health and other stakeholders on a transformative initiative to work on the intersection between health, housing, and the formerly incarcerated has changed many lives. Starting Over Inc. has helped more than 900 men, women, and families since it started and 79 percent of the people who have gone through Starting Over’s transitional program remain housed one year after exiting the program.

District 3: San Jacinto Unified School District Nutrition Services Department: SJUSD’s Nutrition Services Department has facilitated numerous health and wellness projects in collaboration with RUHS-PH and continually seeks new and innovative opportunities to improve the lives of their students, families and community. Recent projects strategized and supported by both agencies include installation of hydration stations at each school site to increase water access to more than 11,000 students; coordinating Sports, Play, and Active Recreation for Kids (SPARK) active classroom and recess training for 40 teachers; measuring cafeteria food waste and brainstorming solutions to rescue uneaten food; piloting “recess lunch” in the elementary school, and collecting data on outdoor activity levels, food consumption and waste, classroom behavior, and reported health problems around lunch time; utilizing signage and murals to promote healthy choices in the cafeteria; hosting learning opportunities and active games during Summer Meals service.

District 4: The Rev. Benita Ramsey: Ramsey has worked as planning council support manager for the Inland Empire HIV Planning Council and a Principal Consultant for BRMG Management Group specializing in social justice, diversity and inclusion. She has also served as a community consultant to Riverside University Health System-Behavioral Health, Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender Outreach Initiatives and as board president of Rainbow Pride Youth Alliance and has been vigilant in attempts to end stigma and discrimination, shaped by her personal journey

from shame to empowerment that occurred after a chance encounter with a boy and his family in a Florida courtroom.

District 5: Deborah Franklin: Franklin is being honored for her strong support of public health in the City of Banning. Under her leadership as an elected official, the City adopted a Healthy Eating Active Living (HEAL) resolution and created the Healthy Banning Initiative demonstrating the City's commitment to adopting and implementing strategies for improving community health.

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