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Merry Grande, Minnesota Public Health  
(612) 963-3243  
[info@mpha.net](mailto:info@mpha.net)

## The Minnesota Public Health Association Announces 2023 MPHA Award Recipients

Minneapolis, Minn. – The [Minnesota Public Health Association](#) (MPHA) presented the 2023 MPHA Awards during the group's Annual Business Meeting on June 14, 2023. The MPHA awards are presented each year to leaders across Minnesota who are passionate advocates for public health and greater health equity.

The [Laura Waterman Wittstock Racial Justice & Health Equity Award](#) was presented to **Vayong Moua, MPA, Director of Racial and Health Equity Advocacy at Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Minnesota**. Vayong has demonstrated an unwavering commitment to racial justice and health equity throughout his 15-year career in public health. Vayong leads advocacy to advance racial and health equity (RHE) in policies and structural determinants of health. In his position with the state's largest health plan, he sees that Minnesota consistently ranks as one of the top states in health, education and many other quality of life indicators, yet also has some of the worst racial inequities in the country. He believes that equity is about how we design powerful, inclusive tables, not just individual seats.

The [B. Robert Lewis Award](#), which honors an elected official who has championed public health, was presented to **Leigh Finke, Minnesota House of Representatives, District 66A**. Representative Finke has been a fierce and tireless advocate for LGBTQ+ Minnesotans the entire time that she's represented 66A in the Minnesota House. At a time when hostility towards queer people and transgender people specifically has become the frightening norm in this country for many individuals, hate movements, and even state governments, Rep. Finke is fighting to ensure that trans Minnesotans and newcomers from other states retain access to lifesaving, gender-affirming care and the dignity and autonomy of being able to seek this care without criminalization.. Rep. Finke has already been well-recognized for her achievements, including by USA Today, who named her Minnesota's Woman of the Year. Perhaps more telling, though, is the recognition she has received from LGBTQ+ residents of Minnesota and their

loved ones, among whom she is a household name and a source of hope in very dangerous times.

**Samantha Lo, Community Health Services Administrator, Pine County Health and Human Services** received the [Dr. Harold 'Hal' Leppink Scholarship](#) for extraordinary public health service to local public health in Greater Minnesota. In the years that she has been with Pine County, Sam's impact on community health and well-being has been life-altering. In the last two years, Sam has implemented employee wellness strategies for her public health team and with the entire HHS organization and to several outside organizations. Conversations in the Pine County HHS organization have shifted from "How do we prevent burnout and what do we do when burnout happens?" to "How do we actively support employee well-being?" This is a monumental cognitive and conversational shift, which has positively impacted the entire organization.

The [Paul and Sheila Wellstone Public Health Achievement Award](#) was presented to **Carissa Dillon, MPH, RD, Food Security Coordinator, Ramsey County**. Carissa exemplifies the spirit of this award because of her commitment to elevating the voices of the most marginalized community members and to ensuring that all residents of Ramsey County have equitable access to healthy food. Carissa has been a dedicated leader in promoting food security, focusing on equity and inclusion of those who are historically disengaged from the system, to educate decision makers about food security challenges and how they relate to equity in our community, and to provide effective government services to reduce hunger amidst a legacy of mistrust that inequitable policies have created with residents from racially and ethnically diverse communities. Beyond her commitment to community engagement, Carissa also works tirelessly to ensure inclusion in her professional capacity, breaking down the traditional government silos and building collaborations with a broad range of partners in both public and private sectors.

This year's [Harvey G. Rogers Environmental Health Leadership Award](#) recipient was **Kathleen Norlien, Environmental Research Scientist at the Minnesota Department of Health**. In a career spanning over 30 years, Kathleen has worked in the areas of health risk from air toxics, emergency planning and preparedness, compliance and rule writing, and asthma. In each of these areas her work has focused on protecting Minnesotans from health risks posed by air-borne chemicals. Kathleen has been instrumental in establishing administrative rules governing both asbestos removal and health risk values for chemicals in ambient air, establishing the 2002 health risk values, the state's first guidance for concentrations of chemicals likely to pose little or no risk to human health, and administering programs to reduce triggers of asthma in homes of children living in Section 8 multi-family housing. She continues to advise the Asthma Program regarding environmental triggers and works to implement considerations for asthma into the Department of Commerce weatherization program. Her work in occupational health focuses on reducing work-related exposures for workers not protected by OSHA, including cosmetologists, manicurists and estheticians. During COVID, Kathleen played a major role in developing guidance around ventilation and air quality in schools.

The [Albert Justus Chesley Award](#), which honors those who have made outstanding contributions to MPHA, was presented to **Matthew Flory, MPP, Associate Director, State Partnerships, Minnesota and Wisconsin offices of the American Cancer Society**. Matt has worked for the Minnesota chapter of the American Cancer Society for more than 22 years. Throughout his professional and personal career, Matt has advocated and supported public policies through grassroots contact with elected officials, encouraging others to do the same. Matt has demonstrated steadfast leadership in building partnerships in the community especially between MPHA and the Local Public Health Association (LPHA). Matt has also served as the President of MPHA and is currently the MPHA Policy and Advocacy co-chair. In his role as co-chair of the MPHA Policy Committee, Matt works assiduously to forge connections among organizations, approaches public health policy initiatives through the lens of health equity to combat structural racism and advance health equity, and continues to give significantly of his time to strengthen MPHA as an organization.

**Shehrose Charania**, recent graduate of the Master of Public Health in Public Health Administration and Policy program, University of Minnesota, was honored as the recipient of this year's [Student Achievement Award](#). Shehrose is a first-generation college student and daughter of immigrants. As a student, she served on MPHA Governing Council, member of an inaugural Leadership Development Cohort for emerging public health professionals from communities of color and American Indians, strengthened her public health skills as a research assistant for the Rural Health Research Center (RHRC), conducted research through the Center for Antiracism Research for Health Equity (CARHE) on the impact of racialized violence on Black birthing people, and other important community work. Shehrose states: "my passion stems from my mother, and I am proud to say that MPHA's investment in me led me to become more motivated to continue to achieve health equity in the future of public health and healthcare. MPHA embodies the essence of me."

The awards were presented at MPHA's Annual Business Meeting, held virtually on June 14, 2023. Those interested in learning more about MPHA's awards and the nomination requirements can find more information on [mpha.net](http://mpha.net).

MPHA represents over 350 public health professionals from a range of organizations across the state including government, nonprofit and for-profit businesses. For more information on MPHA, please visit the [Minnesota Public Health Association](#) website.

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## About the Minnesota Public Health Association

The Minnesota Public Health Association (MPHA) represents over 350 public health professionals across the state of Minnesota who champion the health of our people and communities. The mission of the MPHA is to create a healthier Minnesota through effective

public health practice and engaged citizens. For more information, visit [www.mpha.net](http://www.mpha.net), or connect with us on [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#), [LinkedIn](#), and [Instagram](#).