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Trailblazing California Leaders Celebrated by The James Irvine Foundation for Innovative Leadership

2024 James Irvine Foundation Leadership Awards honor leaders for effective solutions to pressing, high-profile challenges facing the state

SAN FRANCISCO (February 12, 2024) — The James Irvine Foundation today announced the recipients of its 2024 Leadership Awards, honoring nine leaders from six organizations for their dedicated efforts in addressing critical issues impacting Californians. This year's Award recipients are an impressive group of innovators working on a wide range of challenges including teacher preparation, youth justice, college access and completion, and ensuring the health and safety of Asian American and Pacific Islander, LGBTQ+, refugee, and immigrant populations.

Every year, the Leadership Awards acknowledge individuals and organizations committed to innovation and with a proven track record of success in enhancing lives, creating opportunities, and contributing to a better California. Each Award recipient's organization receives a grant of \$350,000 to further support their work benefiting the people of California, with the potential for expansion, replication, or policy support. Additionally, the Irvine Foundation assists recipients in sharing their successful approaches with policymakers and practitioners.

"The California Way means finding new solutions to big problems, and that's exactly what these leaders have demonstrated through their innovative work to enhance teacher preparation, youth justice, college access and completion, and the health and safety of California's diverse communities," said California Governor Gavin Newsom. "I thank The James Irvine Foundation for its commitment to lifting up the impactful work of community leaders across our state to build a more vibrant, inclusive and resilient California."

The 2024 Award recipients (see more information below) are:

- **Elizabeth Baham and Héctor Camacho Jr**, Provost and Senior Vice President of Reach University, for addressing California's teacher shortage through on-the-job degree and credential programs.
- **Francis "Frankie" Guzman**, Senior Director for Youth Justice of National Center for Youth Law, for transforming the justice system by centering youth voices and outcomes.
- **Manjusha Kulkarni**, Executive Director of AAPI Equity Alliance, for confronting hate and discrimination against Asian American and Pacific Islander communities with data, partnerships, and policy solutions.

- **Brian Poth and Nick Vargas**, Executive Director and Director of Development and Strategy of The Source LGBT+ Center, for fostering hope, health, safety, and inclusivity for the Central Valley's LGBTQ+ community.
- **Blanca Meléndrez and Amina Sheik Mohamed**, Executive Director and Director of the UC San Diego ACTRI Center for Community Health, for advancing health equity through collaborative, community-led initiatives.
- **Michele Siqueiros**, President of The Campaign for College Opportunity, for expanding college access and completion through advocacy, research, and coalition building.

"The accomplishments of these diverse leaders and their ongoing commitment to improving the lives of Californians are truly inspiring," said Don Howard, President and CEO of The James Irvine Foundation. "Their innovative approaches to solving tough problems have made a positive impact in so many communities. It's a privilege for the Irvine Foundation to amplify their leadership and provide support as they address some of the most formidable challenges our state is currently facing."

Howard and representatives of the Foundation will join California policymakers, Leadership Awards alumni, and elected officials to honor the 2024 Award recipients at a reception in Sacramento on February 12. Photos and video of the recipients are available [here](#).

Since 2006, The Irvine Foundation has celebrated the achievements of over 100 leaders in California. The selection of Award recipients is conducted by an independent committee, which assesses nominations using criteria including the significance, effectiveness, innovation, and inclusion demonstrated in the leader's work.

More detail about the work of this year's recipients is below. To learn more, please visit IrvineAwards.org.

Elizabeth Baham, ED.D. and Héctor Camacho Jr. are the University Provost and Senior Vice President at Reach University. It wasn't until college that Baham was finally taught by a Black educator. This experience propelled her to enhance access to education for all. In 2015, Baham joined Reach University, an organization that is tackling California's teacher shortage by partnering with schools to train and place aspiring teachers – who are often working in classrooms as aids or other non-teaching personnel – in critical job vacancies. Driven to nurture young leaders of color, Baham now serves as the University Provost and Chief Academic Officer. As a young adult, Camacho felt drawn to teach but didn't know the best way to become a teacher, or how to pay for it. Nine years and over \$100,000 in student debt later, he finally became a teacher. Determined to support others with similar aspirations, and similar barriers, Camacho joined Reach University in 2022 and now serves as Senior Vice President. Together, Baham and Camacho have expanded the organization's reach throughout the state, and obtained accreditations that affirm the University's credibility and allow it to leverage federal funding to keep programs affordable for candidates. By creating accessible, job-embedded pathways to a degree and credential, Reach is preparing high-impact teachers and leaders who reflect the diverse students they serve.

Francis "Frankie" Guzman is the Senior Director for Youth Justice at the National Center for Youth Law. Frankie Guzman's future in advocacy began at age five when his 16-year-old brother was tried as an adult and imprisoned for life. Despite initially excelling in school, Guzman was drawn to the sense of belonging and mentorship offered by youth in a local gang – an association that led to his own incarceration at age 15. After experiencing a decade of trauma at violent, overcrowded facilities, Guzman emerged determined to minimize the impact of the legal system on other youth. His academic talents carried him to community college, UC Berkeley, and UCLA School of Law. Despite academic success and valuable lived experience, Guzman's past record prevented his admission to the California State Bar. He launched a 16-month campaign to prove his "good moral character" and was eventually sworn in as a lawyer. Since 2013, Frankie Guzman has led National Center for Youth Law's Youth Justice program, which empowers youth to participate in systems reform, shift the youth justice system from punishment to public health, and eliminate racial disparities in the system. While in this role Guzman has served as a primary contributor to more than 20 pieces of legislation to reform youth justice.

Manjusha Kulkarni is the Executive Director of AAPI Equity Alliance. As a teen, Kulkarni observed her mother file a successful class action lawsuit against the state over discriminatory policies against non-European doctors. This experience, along with incidents that made her feel "othered" as one of the only AAPI students in school, seeded Kulkarni's activism and compelled her to pursue a law degree and a career in civil rights. After engaging in critical work in civil rights and health law and policy, she was entrusted to lead AAPI Equity Alliance (formerly A3PCON) in 2017. Kulkarni led the forty-year-old organization into a new era, growing it from a behind-the-scenes organization to one that leads groundbreaking work in health care access, interpersonal violence, and mental health. AAPI Equity Alliance is now a coalition of over 40 organizations that serves the 1.6 million Asian American and Pacific Islanders in Los Angeles and beyond, confronting discrimination, fighting mental health disparities, and pushing for legal and policy changes. Kulkarni is also a co-founder of Stop AAPI Hate, a national coalition that collects data and fights racial injustice targeting Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders.

Brian Poth and Nick Vargas are the co-founders of The Source LGBTQ+ Center. Poth and Vargas grew up in the rural town of Visalia where they both felt a constant struggle to find acceptance as LGBTQ youth. As young adults, they sought freedom and opportunity in big cities. When personal circumstances eventually called each of them home, they found themselves back in the same challenging environment they had worked hard to leave behind. After their paths crossed, Poth and Vargas decided to work together to build the community they so desperately needed and set out on a mission to create a safe space—in part so youth would not feel the need to escape as they did. They founded The Source LGBTQ+ Center in 2016. The Source is now the largest LGBTQ Center between Sacramento and Los Angeles and has provided services to over 24,000 individuals last year alone. The organization offers more than 30 programs including HIV prevention and support, youth leadership opportunities, transgender resources, a drop-in center, cultural competency trainings, and community events. Their innovative approach ensures that every LGBTQ+ individual in the area has access to the care and community they need to live healthy, fulfilling lives.

Blanca Meléndrez and Amina Sheik Mohamed serve as the Executive Director and Director, respectively, at the UC San Diego ACTRI Center for Community Health (CCH). Meléndrez and Sheik Mohamed advance a Community-Led Transformation Model that activates community-designed solutions to address social determinants of health. As immigrants, Meléndrez and Sheik Mohamed leverage their personal journeys and insights to fuel their efforts to help others navigate similar paths.

Under Meléndrez’s leadership, CCH has piloted population-tailored health promotion programs and leveraged over \$80 million to support CCH initiatives that address a wide range of needs. One of CCH’s flagship programs is the Refugee Health Unit (RHU). Founded by Sheik Mohamed in 2017, RHU administers initiatives that promote the wellbeing of refugee families. One such initiative is the San Diego Refugee Communities Coalition, a collective of 12 ethnic community-based organizations that, with support from the RHU team, creatively work together on programming and funding opportunities to address the needs of San Diego’s diverse refugee populations. Looking forward, the leaders plan to replicate their initiatives across California, advancing their Community-Led Transformation Model to ensure those who are most impacted by systemic inequities are actively shaping solutions.

Michele Siqueiros is the President of Campaign for College Opportunity. Siqueiros grew up seeing her hardworking mother, an immigrant and seamstress, struggle with economic and personal hardship. The first in her family to go to college, Siqueiros initially thought she was lucky to get there. As she got older, she realized it was the support of family, mentors, programs, and policies – including affirmative action, financial aid, and even the volunteers who helped her fill out her FASFA forms – that made her path to college possible. When California voted to ban affirmative action in public universities, Siqueiros was attending UCLA on an affirmative action fellowship. She recognized that the path to college would be more difficult for the next generation of students and has since dedicated her career to fighting for college access and success. Over her 20-year tenure at The Campaign for College Opportunity, she has championed policies and initiatives that have yielded tangible results, including clearer transfer pathways between community colleges and the CSU system, a public community college scorecard to make student progress and success metrics transparent, and crucial legislation promoting student success at community colleges. As The Campaign’s research projects that California will face a shortfall of 1.65 million workers with college degrees by 2030, their role is more crucial than ever.

About The James Irvine Foundation

The James Irvine Foundation is a private, nonprofit grantmaking foundation dedicated to expanding opportunity for the people of California. The Foundation’s focus is a California where all low-income workers have the power to advance economically. Since 1937 the Foundation has provided more than \$2.6 billion in grants to organizations throughout California. The Foundation ended 2023 with \$3.1 billion in assets and provided \$180.3 million in grants. For more, please visit www.irvine.org.

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