

Public health advocacy: Leveraging the immigrant experience

Featuring Seciah Aquino, DrPH, MS
Latino Coalition for a Healthy California



This time on Code WACK!

Public health advocacy requires considerable insight into the major issues that affect communities. How best to gain this insight? **What role does direct personal experience play?**

Today **Seciah Aquino, DrPH, MS** shares how her lived experience as an immigrant has informed her work as Executive Director of a leading health equity advocacy organization, the **Latino Coalition for a Healthy California**. **How did her experience, first as a young child in Guatemala and later as an immigrant living in Gardena, California, inspire her to pursue higher education and transform her life, and the lives of others? And how did that experience inform her response to the COVID pandemic?**

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Tell us a bit about yourself. What's your personal background, and how did you become interested in the issue of Latino healthcare?

“Well, this is very personal to me. The fight for Health Justice that we do today starts with a young girl back in Guatemala, Central America, where I was born. I was born to a working class family in Guatemala.

My mother was a dentist there. My dad was a businessman, a family very close, close knit, close to God, and a value that was instilled in myself and my family was always to help others and to put your own needs aside, to look out for the well being of others and especially communities that were suffering injustices. And so I grew up going to [the] outskirts, pueblos in Guatemala, and my mom would provide free dental care. So I grew up with a very, you know, a very defined passion for helping and standing up for those that didn't have the resources or the infrastructure that they needed and deserve to be well.” – ***Seciah Aquino, DrPH, MS***

And what about when your family moved to the United States?

“I grew up undocumented in California. A lot of the infrastructure and the safety net changes that I now advocate for, I personally saw and experienced when we moved here, you know. We were unhoused. We didn't have a place to stay for the first couple of months, we stayed with a family friend who had a mobile home in Gardena, California, and, you know, and it's, it's always heartbreaking looking back,

“.. for those first few months, our young family slept in a one bedroom. My mother, who was expecting, my two other sisters, and myself, would sleep on the bed. My dad would sleep on the floor. He was working odd jobs to be able to provide for us. And it's the fastest that I've seen my parents age...

“It was basically a very early training in public health and in systemic change, right? Because I was able to experience what it's like to be in need of food stamps, to have access to the WIC program, and for the WIC

program to put food on the table, and for young immigrant family to have a little bit of extra milk, a little bit of extra cereal to share with the neighbor down the street who didn't have anything to put on the table that day..." -- **Seciah Aquino, DrPH, MS**

You've led the Latino Coalition for Healthy California for nearly two years, and served as Deputy Director before that, during the COVID pandemic. What was it like to lead the nonprofit during that critical time?

"...it was quite a privilege to be in a position to serve as a nonprofit leader, especially as a Latina, and as we know, COVID 19 and the pandemic was really hurtful for the Latino community and for communities of color. And you know, [for] those of us in public health, it was very clear that this was going to be the case because these are exacerbated health inequities. These inequities didn't just pop up because of COVID 19. They had been at play for many, many years ...

"People were fearful. We were also coming off a ... Trump presidency, and there had been a chilling effect that ... had led many community members to disenroll from life saving care, because of fear ... It was really hard to see these various issues intersecting and creating deeper, deeper issues for the community.

"And so what a lot of our work highlighted was ... utilizing and tapping into those trust and communication networks across the state ... Our tias, our abuelitas, you know they know how to communicate ... So for us, it was really about activating that network, so that we could get the word out to community members.

"We ended up doing the very important work of translating and being the bridge from government directly into community, right? *'What are the resources? What is the latest information that we're hearing? Use your mask. Wash your hands. If you're sick. Don't show up to work. This is where you can go get some support once the vaccines come, right? Let's get vaccinated.'*" – **Seciah Aquino, DrPH, MS**

Helpful Links

[Latino Coalition for a Healthy California](#)

[Guatemalan Migration to Los Angeles: Struggle for Survival](#), *Jonathan Solares, CSUDH*

[Why Public Health Advocacy?](#), *Lerner Center for Public Health Advocacy, Johns Hopkins*

[The Role of Leadership in Public Health Advocacy](#), *Tulane University*

[Advancing California's Community Health Worker & Promotor Workforce in Medi-Cal](#), *Center for Health Care Strategies*

Episode Transcript

Read the full [episode transcript](#).

Biography: Seciah Aquino, DrPH,MS

Dr. Seciah Aquino serves as Executive Director for the **Latino Coalition for a Healthy California (LCHC)** — the State's leading policy organization advocating for health equity in the Latine community. In her role, she is

passionate to advance health justice for CA Latines through unity. Latines working hand in hand with fellow siblings from other systemically disenfranchised communities to advance a unified Health Equity Agenda. One that seeks sustainable systemic changes through policy solutions that will address the acute and long-term repercussions of health inequities. She strongly believes we must, as a collective -- own our power and harness our resiliency to achieve true justice.

Dr. Aquino is a proud immigrant from Guatemala. Through life experience, she has been blessed to learn first-hand how to stand up for the oppressed, how to provide for the needy, and how to speak up for the rights of the destitute. Dr. Aquino began her journey in public health as a promotora and, throughout her career, after that, has remained committed to creating a culture of health across the nation. For over 10 years, she has worked to advance health equity and social justice issues across non-profit, government, and academic sectors at multiple levels, including local, state, and national. Before her role as Executive Director, she served as Deputy Director at the Latino Coalition for a Healthy California.

Dr. Aquino holds a Doctorate in Public Health (DrPH) from Harvard University and a Master of Science (MS) in Global Medicine from the University of Southern California.

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