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Dr. Virgilio Licona—A Crusader for Health and Social Justice

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Dr. Virgilio Licona is a national treasure. He was a pioneer in the early days of the movement to create health equity through community health centers and he has dedicated his life to caring for the medically underserved and serving as the voice for those who are often not heard. He recently retired, after serving as Vice President of Medical Services at Salud Family Health Centers in Fort Lupton, Colorado since 2000. Salud is committed to providing an affordable, high quality medical home to families and individuals in the nine northern Colorado communities they serve.

A gifted speaker, Dr. Licona can motivate and inspire those around him with words that so succinctly paint a picture that his listener cannot help but take up his cause. With this skill he has treated those most in need, administered health centers, impacted public policy, and changed the overall landscape of community health.

“We were still burning on fumes from the sixties.”

Born as the son of farmworkers in California, Licona came to Colorado in the early 1970s as a community organizer and political activist. After earning a degree from Colorado State University, he founded and served as director of La Clinica del Valle in Rocky Ford, Colorado largely to serve the needs of migrant and seasonal farmworkers. Licona and the countless others who were working for social justice intended to change the country. These defenders of the underserved were fueled by the efforts of the 1960s and President Johnson’s War on Poverty. He fully believed that through programs like Head Start, Medicaid, and job training through the Office of Economic Opportunity, that they could eliminate poverty. He believed that one day everyone could compete on a level playing field. Dr. Licona’s place in this movement would unfold over 40 years of dedicated service to community health centers.

As director of La Clinica del Valle, Licona struggled to find a Physician Assistant (PA-C) to work in his clinic. Undeterred, he enrolled in school to become a PA-C. After graduation, he began his clinical career at Pueblo Community Health Center

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providing high quality, culturally competent health care. Not long after, the health center was unsuccessful in finding a physician to serve their rural community. Perhaps unsurprisingly, Licona enrolled in medical school at the Autonomous University of Hidalgo. Not one to waste an opportunity to build new partnerships, Dr. Licona was among the first residents to participate in a new collaboration between medical schools in Mexico and rural residencies in the United States. After completing his residency in family medicine he returned to Pueblo Community Health Center as a physician to serve those most in need.

“Healthcare is for people and not for profit.”

Dr. Licona doesn't only provide care as a family physician. He has long been an ardent advocate for the medically underserved. He testified before the Colorado state legislature for the first time in 1975 on behalf of the community health center movement. In the late 1990s, he returned to the state capitol to successfully lead the advocacy efforts for a bill that would provide prenatal care for undocumented women.

Dr. Licona also served on the National Advisory Council of the National Health Service Corps as well as on the National Rural Health Advisory Committee. He contributed as a member of the Legislative Policy Committee before being elected to the board of directors of the American Academy of Family Physicians. In his home state, he served as president of the Colorado Academy of Family Physicians and on the Board of The Colorado Health Foundation as well as Colorado Community Health Network and Community Health Association of Mountain/Plains States. Dr. Licona used these leadership positions to champion higher quality healthcare and increased access to care for those who need it the most.

“We're helping move the health care status of the country forward.”

Dr. Licona has been recognized by his peers throughout his illustrious career. In 2000, he was the recipient of the Colorado Minority Health Forum's "Outstanding Contributor to Minority Health Care in Colorado Award." This distinction so encapsulated the life of Dr. Licona that today it is known as the "Dr. Virgilio Licona Award."

For Dr. Licona's legacy as a community leader and health rights activist, as a distinguished primary health care provider and accomplishments at the national, state and local levels, he was honored by the National Association of Community Health Centers with the Samuel U. Rodgers Achievement Award in 2015. It was presented at the 46th annual Community Health Institute & EXPO in Orlando, FL, a national conference attended by nearly 2,000 community health leaders from across the country.

In his acceptance speech, Dr. Licona took the opportunity to look back on his remarkable accomplishments on the march towards quality healthcare for everyone. He remarked, "It has become very clear to me, 42 years later, that what we accomplished and what we are accomplishing is not just moving the health care status of our patients forward. We're helping move the health care status of the country forward."

The egalitarian principles of this self-described "foot soldier" are beyond inspirational. His lifetime of contributions and commitment to social justice and equality positively

impacted thousands of individuals and families in the communities he served, and had indisputable reverberations to hundreds of thousands throughout his home state of Colorado, and millions across the nation.

Ever the visionary, Dr. Licona continues to inspire the next generation to take up this cause. His successors owe a great deal of gratitude to the work of Dr. Virgilio Licona. We are closer than ever to achieving his dream of health equity yet much remains to be accomplished. While Dr. Licona was fueled by the spirit of the 1960s, those who take up the mission of community health today can be spiritually nourished to push on by the legacy of this great and honorable man. The remarkable dedication and passion of Dr. Licona will endure and serve as a guiding light for his colleagues in the Community Health Center Movement and beyond.