

Healthcare Hero Award Winners

The award recognizes twelve individuals who represent the unwavering dedication and exceptional commitment of all members of the long-term care community who put their own lives at risk to care for others during the 2020-21 COVID-19 pandemic.

2021



Adelaida Yanez - ER Manager - Jerold Phelps Community Hospital, Garberville

When the pandemic hit, the risk of having a skilled nursing unit housed in the hospital was clear. Adela was a nurse/manager in the hospital emergency department at the time and stepped up when the DON was out on medical leave. She worked with the SNF staff to adapt to the changing daily requirements. She trained workers in rigorous new infection control protocols while also picking up extra shifts and working overtime. In September 2020, the biggest wildfire in California history threatened the DP SNF. Adela led the evacuation of non-ambulatory patients to a safe location while keeping the patients free of the virus. When COVID-19 testing began, Adela was among the first to be tested. Then she led the facility vaccination effort and organized weekly clinics, vaccinating up to 250 people per day within a 50-mile radius of the rural hospital. In large part because of Adela's leadership, service and sacrifice, the community hospital came out of the pandemic without a single case of COVID-19 among residents and staff.



Angelita Deandres - Activity Director - Boulder Creek Post-Acute, Poway

As the COVID-19 lockdown began to take its toll on residents, Angelita became their lifeline to families and friends. She initiated a process to notify families weekly and sometimes daily about the condition of their loved ones. She scheduled phone calls, Facetime and window visits. She came in on the weekends during her time off to volunteer with her church to pray for residents and offer encouragement. Angelita arranged psychosocial services to help residents overcome loneliness and depression. And when families lost loved ones, she provided comfort with calls, gifts and spiritual support. Angelita also took time to cheer the staff with surprise weekend lunches and birthday celebrations. She even led her activity team to work side-by-side with nurses in the COVID-19 unit when the facility had an outbreak. Angelita's ongoing love, compassion and assistance helped residents, families and staff overcome the challenges faced by all during the pandemic.



Donna Navarte - LVN - Vienna Nursing and Rehabilitation, Lodi

During a month long COVID-19 outbreak, Donna immediately volunteered to work in the 19-bed Red Zone along with her husband who is a CNA. As the lead nurse in the quarantined area, she worked 12 hour shifts during the day while he worked 12 hour shifts at night. Because of their grueling workload, the couple sent their son to Las Vegas to stay with his grandparents. Donna never missed a shift during the outbreak and eventually tested positive for COVID-19. She spent two precarious weeks in the ICU, at times on a ventilator. Even then, she kept in close contact with the facility, texting co-workers about resident care until hospital staff took away her cellphone so she could rest and recover. After spending two weeks in post-acute rehab at Vienna she returned to work after two months. Donna went right back into the Red Zone and said she would do it all over again because of her love for her job, her friends and her residents.



Jisela Benitez-Charge Nurse/LVN - Meadowood Nursing Center, Clearlake

Jisela has 15 years of dedicated service to the facility, and when COVID-19 hit the rural Clearlake area, she never blinked an eye, pulling multiple double shifts in the COVID-19 isolation unit. As the head of household for her extended immigrant family including her mother, sibling and children, she put her personal life on hold. Jisela joked that she lived at the facility, but she did it with love and a positive attitude. During one two-week period, she worked 14 hours a day. During a second outbreak early in the year she again averaged 12-hour days. Jisela never came up for air until the facility was in the clear and she remains a valued employee, teacher and mentor.

2021



Angel Haro -LVN- California Park Rehabilitation Hospital, Chico

Loved and respected by his co-workers, Angel was one of the first to volunteer to leave his role as unit manager to work with sick patients in the COVID-19 unit which was being prepared in case of an outbreak. He quickly began recruiting volunteers to join him. But when an actual outbreak took place, sickness and fear left the facility with a critical workforce shortage. Angel began to cover extra shifts, working overtime and doubles as both an LVN and a CNA. As preparations finally got underway to transfer positive residents to a special COVID-19 clinic, the facility again had limited staff and no available registry workers. Angel stepped up and worked 24 hours to provide nursing coverage. The next morning, when it was time to transfer COVID-19 patients to the clinic earlier than expected, guess who drove the bus? Angel, of course.



Gerardo Camarena - Janitor - Royal Care Skilled Nursing Center, Escondido

Gerardo has worked full time at the facility for almost 20 years and comes to work before his shift so that he will never be late. He has never called in sick. A jack of all trades, Gerardo covers for laundry, housekeeping, maintenance, and even does plumbing work. He has a great rapport with the staff and residents and when he sees something that needs to be repaired or cleaned, he takes the initiative. That's how he faced COVID-19. In April 2020, the center had eight residents test positive for the virus. The news prompted several employees to call in sick including two of Gerardo's older housekeeping and laundry coworkers who had underlying health concerns. Despite his own fear of the virus, he worked the next 50 days in a row, 50 to 60 hours each week. Gerardo worked tirelessly to keep the hallways, resident rooms and offices free from the virus, always with a smile and great disposition. By the end of the outbreak, only eleven residents and eleven staff members tested positive for the virus. Due in large part to Gerardo's continued diligence, the center did not have another positive resident case for the next eight months.



Melicia Williams - CNA - Torrance Care Center West

Melicia, or Mely as she is known was one of the brave warriors of the pandemic who stayed and worked for as long as needed to cover staffing. While most nurses dreaded working in the Red Zone, the 33-year veteran healthcare worker volunteered to take care of the sickest residents. When CNAs called off for the night shift, Mely was available to help with a smile, despite working very long hours and most days of the week. Mely's happy and bright disposition and patience with behavioral residents has resulted in outstanding connections with residents, families and staff. She has the power to calm disturbed residents with empathy and a tough demeanor that commands residents' cooperation. It's easy to love her animated personality. Mely worked the most hours of any staff member and took no vacation during the pandemic displaying tenacity, compassion and self-sacrifice. Her exceptional commitment to residents and co-workers is an inspiration to us all.



Ginalyn Patague - CNA - Wagner Heights Nursing and Rehabilitation, Stockton

During one of the darker periods of the pandemic when a COVID-19 outbreak occurred during Christmas, staff shortages were daily occurrences and lonely residents were battling for their lives. But Ginalyn went above and beyond for her residents; holding their hands and providing excellent care and emotional support. She was asked to do a variety of tasks that she did willingly, no questions asked, even if it was not in her comfort-zone. Ginalyn worked every single day during the outbreak, doubles included, with grace and acceptance, no matter what the day brought. When she contracted COVID-19 herself it was hard to keep her down, even when she was encouraged to stay home to rest and recover. During her eight-year tenure at Wagner Heights, she has never complained or refused to help anyone that asked - and she always did it with a smile on her face.

2021



Davone Phimmaaphai - DSD/LVN -Oakwood Gardens Care Center, Fresno

Davone joined the team as a DSD at the very beginning of the pandemic. As the virus spread, she also had to take on the added role of infection preventionist. Tenacious, committed and proactive, Davone remained focused and resilient throughout the turmoil. Davone singlehandedly tested more than 150 COVID-19-positive residents and staff in 2020, while she remained free of COVID-19. During an outbreak when most of the facility leadership were all out with the virus, Davone was the heart and backbone of the facility, focusing on both clinical and operational duties. When all hope and energy was depleted, Davone motivated those around her to step up and take on additional roles and responsibilities to keep the facility afloat. She joined her colleagues on the floor to provide patient care alongside the team. Davone never wavered in her dedication to the residents and became a source of strength and inspiration for the staff. Her contagious laugh made others smile and her energy inspired the people around her during the most challenging times.



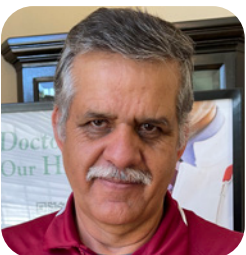
Yasmin McNaughton - Activities Director - Carlmont Gardens Nursing Center, Belmont

Yasmin has been a shining light throughout the pandemic. Early on, she used her disaster preparedness training to guide the staff to create cohort zones and led efforts to screen visitors. She also coordinated compassionate visits, family reunifications, and facility celebrations for birthdays and anniversaries, decorating the facility for every event and holiday. Yasmin found ways to provide purpose for residents and staff including honoring an 85-year-old facility artist, and the annual tradition of packing and shipping holiday boxes to orphans. When the virus hit in January, it took the lives of some of the most vulnerable residents. After a period of grieving, Yasmin brought everyone together for a moving Celebration of Life. There were tears, laughter and memories shared. Family members ended the celebration by planting two small cherry trees with commemorative plaques. One honors the 12 precious residents who moved on and the other honors employees for their efforts in fighting the virus. We hear positive comments from passers-by, and we know the service and ongoing tributes to residents and staff are helping to provide comfort and closure thanks to the incredible leadership of Yasmin.



John Melvin - LVN - Pacific Gardens Nursing & Rehabilitation, Fresno

John Melvin represents the person in every facility that is known as the rock. For nearly 15 years he has been an integral part of Pacific Gardens, and never so much as during the stressful challenge of COVID-19. As a well-known heart, head and shoulders for team members to lean on, John quickly became a go-to for scared and worried staff who were afraid of the new and unknown virus. When the building was initially hit with an outbreak, John was among the first to volunteer to work in the Red Zone. Recognizing his special role with front-line staff, he fearlessly helped the rest of the team face the virus. John worked tirelessly, 12-hour shifts, five to six day a week, to ensure the residents were safe and well-cared for and that staff would feel a sense of comfort and ease. As a result of John's calm leadership, his genuine care and concern for his CNAs, his tireless energy and his sense of humor and infectious laugh, the staff kept working through the roughest of days. Because he would never seek recognition for himself, it is an honor to recognize John as a CAHF Healthcare Hero.



Martin Carrillo Sanchez – Maintenance Director, Catered Manor Nursing Center, Long Beach

Tough. A huge heart. Caring and compassionate. Those are some of the words that describe Martin. He never missed a day of work during the pandemic and even came in on his days off to clean and disinfect the facility. He washed and folded laundry, moved and cleaned beds, hung plastic barriers, ordered and stocked PPE and fearlessly led his team. Martin was always the first to volunteer for extra assignments in addition to his duties as maintenance director and acting housekeeping and laundry supervisor. On top of the pandemic, during the first heat wave of the summer, the air conditioning unit broke down. Martin made the fix. His positive attitude and encouraging words made him a true role model during the pandemic.