



NEWS

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For Immediate Release

County of San Mateo Names First Chief Equity Officer

Position will champion equity & inclusion, identify areas for institutional change

Redwood City — Reinforcing its commitment to delivering services and evaluating existing structures through a lens of equity and inclusion, the County of San Mateo has named a long-time health equity advocate to its first-ever chief equity officer position.

Shireen Malekafzali currently serves as the health equity officer and senior manager for health policy, planning and equity for County Health. She begins her new role later this month and said she looks forward to working with County, city and community leaders on the path toward operationalizing equity.

“Starting the journey in partnership, with clear goals and shared language will help us build the trust and the infrastructure needed to support the journey’s success,” Malekafzali said. “When equity is achieved, we will ensure all people can reach their full potential in San Mateo County regardless of race, ethnicity, immigration status, income, zip code, ability, gender, sexual orientation or age.”

County Manager Mike Callagy said the new position will help his office reach across departments and bring an equity lens to issues such as housing, jobs, transportation and food access.

“Equity must be woven into every aspect of how the County provides for all our residents, and in particular those who are our most vulnerable. The COVID-19 pandemic shined a brighter light on our structural biases and disparities and showed us that we must do better. With Shireen’s experience and thoughtful approach to complex issues with often many sides, she is the ideal person to help lead the County in this critically important endeavor,” Callagy said.

Callagy said Malekafzali will scale up the work she spearheaded for seven years at County Health, creating diverse partnerships, advocating policy, providing leadership and strategically engaging the community to empower all voices. In response to COVID-19, she led the health equity strategy including development of a seven-point approach for equitable vaccine distribution and developed a community-led COVID-testing model.

Malekafzali’s 20-year career includes policy, teaching, research and coalition building work across the nation. She holds a Bachelor of Science in environmental studies and a Master’s in public health.

Both she and Callagy said that the chief equity officer role and County-wide accountability are more critical than ever to ensure that government institutions don't unknowingly perpetuate inequalities by maintaining the status quo.

"To truly be a government for the people and of the people, we must continually strive to understand how we can do better by the people, all people. Equity can't be couched in the way we administer one program or resource but in all the ways we hold ourselves accountable and define successful governance," Malekafzali said.

The chief equity officer position is the second newly created County role aimed at bettering the welfare and outcomes of both employees and residents. In late 2020, the County Manager's Office also hired Nicole Westercamp as its first chief wellbeing officer and tasked her with implementing systemic measures to encourage employee self-care and emotional wellbeing.

"Neither of these positions is commonly found in many governmental organizations, and they are a testament to how the County of San Mateo is leading in cultural change and advancement," Callagy said. "With Shireen and Nicole on board, we are truly being the change we want to see."

Callagy credited the Board of Supervisors' innovative leadership in approving these two new posts and prioritizing equity as the lens through which all County functions and services will be evaluated.

"In January 2020, as I began my year as president of the Board, I set my priority and focus on equity and as that year showed us, this work is as timely and important as ever," Supervisor Warren Slocum said. "I and my colleagues are incredibly excited to watch Shireen make — in the words of the late Congressman John Lewis — some 'good trouble!'"

With Malekafzali moving from County Health to the County Manager's Office, Deputy Health Officer Curtis Chan will take on additional responsibilities as public health equity officer.

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