

Foundation Unveils The Spark Prize, Five Recipients Receive \$200K to Fuel Their Health Equity Leadership Journeys

New prize invests in visionary Missourians with potential to drive long-term change

ST. LOUIS, MO, UNITED STATES, June 5, 2025 /EINPresswire.com/ -- Missouri Foundation for Health (MFH) has announced the five inaugural recipients of The Spark Prize, a bold new award investing in Missourians

who are leading transformative work to improve health and well-being in Missouri. Each winner will receive \$200,000 in unrestricted funding to support their leadership and vision. The Spark Prize awards differ from traditional grants because they are flexible, trust-based funding for individuals, not organizations.



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“The Spark Prize is a bet on people,” said Dwayne Proctor, President & CEO of MFH. “It’s not just about what they’re planning on doing within the next year, it’s about looking forward to where they’ll be as health equity leaders in five years, 10 years, 20 years from now. The prize will hopefully fan the flames of their work for decades to come, and we’re looking forward to witnessing it.”

Awardees were selected for their potential to create long-term impact in Missouri. The five recipients were chosen from more than 170 nominations representing diverse

backgrounds, regions, and sectors across Missouri.

2025 Spark Prize Winners:

- Diego Abente: President and CEO of Casa de Salud, expanding access to culturally responsive clinical and mental health care for immigrants and uninsured communities in Missouri.
- Emily Brown: Co-founder and CEO of Attane Health, pioneering food-based health care

solutions to address chronic disease and create healthier communities.

- Kelly McGowan: Founder and Executive Director of Transform 314, using creative education and neighborhood-based solutions to reimagine how residents connect with local government.
- Ciearra “CJ” Walker: Founder and CEO of the Community Health Worker Coalition, building a statewide career network to strengthen frontline health leadership and drive community-rooted change.
- Evonnia Woods: Organizer and movement builder creating new infrastructure for racial, reproductive, and economic justice across Missouri.

"These leaders are reimagining and transforming what healthy communities look like," said Ivory Clarke, Vice President of Strategic Relationships at MFH. "This award recognizes their leadership and vision, and fuels the momentum they're building."

This year's recipients are tackling challenges ranging from maternal health and housing to mental health, policy engagement, food justice, and culturally responsive care. Many work outside traditional institutions and have built new models rooted in lived experience, innovation, and deep community ties.

The Foundation also recognized four "Leaders to Watch" for their promising contributions to health and well-being across the state.

- Nicole Brown (Joplin), Executive Director of One Joplin
- Hopey Fink (St. Louis), Attorney, Legal Services of Eastern Missouri
- Lawrence Simonson (Columbia), Executive Director, Missouri Immunization Coalition
- Liza Weiss (St. Louis), Founder and Executive Director, Missouri Appleseed

Awardees will be recognized on June 11 at Missouri Foundation for Health's 25th anniversary commemoration. The event will look back on a quarter-century of innovation, partnership, and commitment to a more equitable Missouri; highlight where the Foundation is today; and offer a vision for the organization's future.

View the full [Spark Prize digital press kit here](#).

About the Spark Prize

The Spark Prize is a \$200,000 award for individuals with outstanding vision, commitment, and promise to improve health and well-being in Missouri. Now in its inaugural year, the prize was created by Missouri Foundation for Health to foster and amplify exceptional people throughout the state who are tackling social challenges that impact health and developing innovative solutions to help communities thrive. The award is an investment in future impact, giving recipients the freedom to use the funding in whatever ways best support them. Learn more at mffh.org/spark

About Missouri Foundation for Health

Missouri Foundation for Health is building a more equitable future through collaboration,

convening, knowledge sharing, and strategic investment. Working in partnership with communities and nonprofits, MFH is transforming systems to eliminate inequities within all aspects of health and addressing the social and economic factors that shape health outcomes. Learn more at mffh.org

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