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"Marathon not a Sprint"

90-Day Sprint: Finding My Pace in the Marathon of Health Equity

Transitioning from student to fellow has been one of the most meaningful parts of my journey so far. As a student, I learned about evidence-based principles and public health frameworks but this fellowship with Nova Scripts Central has challenged me to apply those lessons in real-world settings, working across communities and systems to make health equity tangible.



Pictured: Dr. Charys Demery with our former fellow Dr. Neha Dhavalikar at her graduation ceremony as she passes on the baton!

These first 90 days have felt like a sprint, full of opportunities and reflection, but they've also taught me the rhythm of the marathon. The foundation built by previous fellows helped me adjust and find my footing, showing how to approach this work with purpose and patience. Each experience, from learning the funding side of community programs to engaging with national leaders, has reminded me that advancing health equity requires both heart and structure.

Learning the Landscape: From Policy to Practice

Early in my fellowship, I had the opportunity to participate in a grant writing and proposal development workshop hosted by Kaiser Permanente — my first deep dive into the behind-the-scenes world of funding. I've always been passionate about health equity work, but this session opened my eyes to what it truly takes to sustain that work beyond passion alone.

I learned that every impactful program begins with a story. A story supported by data, community need, and a clear vision for measurable outcomes. The process challenged me to think not only about what change looks like, but how to translate that vision into language that funders understand. Writing a proposal isn't just about asking for resources; it's about building partnerships rooted in shared purpose.

> ***"If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together" - well-known African Proverb***

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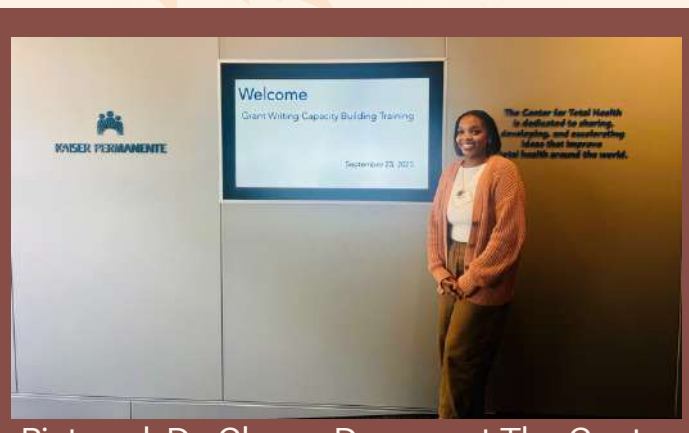
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This workshop shifted how I view sustainability. I began to see that equity-driven initiatives survive when strategy meets empathy, when compassion is backed by planning, metrics, and collaboration.



Pictured: Dr. Charys Demery at The Center for Total Health, Kaiser Permanente in Washington D.C.

During this fellowship, I intend to build upon these skills by learning how organizations like Nova Scripts Central connect mission to measurable impact — how they translate compassion into capacity. Understanding that process is what allows community-based programs to thrive long after a single grant cycle ends.

Understanding the System: Medicaid and the Foundation of Health Equity

Soon after, I attended Kaiser's Medicaid and Medicare Policy Training, which reshaped how I think about healthcare access in this country. Medicaid is often described as the "backbone" of our safety-net system, and for good reason: it covers more than 76 million Americans, including half of all U.S. children and a significant share of adults living with chronic conditions. Listening to policy experts discuss how Medicaid not only provides care but also creates equity reframed how I view its importance.

One panelist shared that nearly one in five women of reproductive age rely on Medicaid for coverage, and I was struck by how this program quietly sustains so many aspects of life. From maternal health and behavioral health to long-term care for older adults. I was particularly moved by discussions on Medicaid's expansion to include doula services and community-based care models that address root causes rather than symptoms. It reminded me that policy isn't abstract; it's deeply personal. Behind every coverage decision is a family, a child, or a patient whose life trajectory can change because of access or the lack of it.

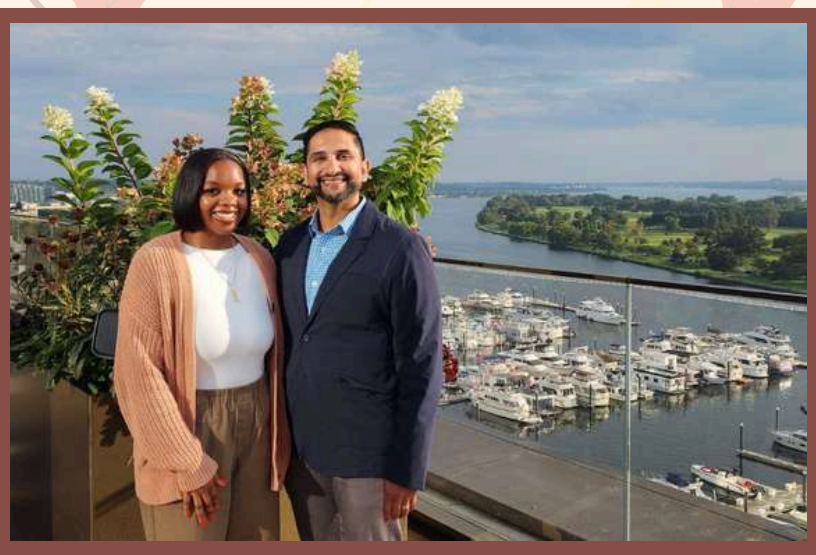
A statement from one of the panelists resonated with me deeply:

"Talking about equity isn't optional — it's what we do."

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Pictured: Dr. Charys Demery with NSC's Executive Director Dr. Donney John in Washington D.C.

That idea has stayed with me. It mirrors the mission of Nova Scripts Central — an organization that doesn't just provide medications, but works to eliminate barriers and restore trust in care for vulnerable patients.

As a fellow, I hope to deepen my understanding of Medicaid's role in shaping access, while exploring how safety-net organizations like NSC can bridge the gap between policy intention and patient reality.

Coming Full Circle: The D.E.E.P. Program at Ark Church

If there's one experience that has grounded me in the why behind health equity, it's the Driving Education to Empower People (D.E.E.P.) Program at The Ark Church in Baltimore. This seven-month initiative, developed by Nova Scripts Central, empowers individuals living with prediabetes and diabetes through culturally relevant education, lifestyle support, and hands-on learning.

The D.E.E.P. program has been close to me since my time as a student, when I had the opportunity to assist in facilitating workshops and supporting participants as they learned to take charge of their health. Now, returning as a fellow, I've stepped into a new role leading sessions, guiding discussions, and helping shape the educational experience for the congregation.

Seeing the program from this new perspective has been both humbling and inspiring. I've come to appreciate how much trust and collaboration go into effective community health work.



Pictured: Dr. Charys Demery presenting at ARK Church Diabetes Program

The congregation's deep faith in their leaders, Pastor Bishop Carter and Lady Cora, created a safe space for meaningful conversations about health and wellness. When people feel understood and respected, they engage differently — not as patients being lectured to, but as partners in their own care.

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This experience reminded me why Nova Scripts Central's model is so vital: it meets people where they are, in the spaces they already trust. Through this fellowship, I hope to continue learning how to build on that model, ensuring that community education feels empowering, not intimidating, and that health equity efforts always begin with trust.

Raising My Voice: Advocacy on Capitol Hill

That same sense of community followed me to Washington, D.C., when I joined students from the University of South Carolina College of Pharmacy and the American Pharmacists Association (APhA) for a day of advocacy on Capitol Hill. Together, we met with legislators to advocate for the Equitable Community Access to Pharmacist Services Act (ECAPS). A bill designed to expand access to pharmacist-provided care, especially in medically underserved areas.

Walking into those offices, I realized how interconnected the stories from community spaces like The Ark Church are to the policies debated in Congress. Behind every legislative talking point is a real person — someone struggling to manage their health because of barriers in access, cost, or trust.



Pictured: Dr. Charys Demery with Representative Acacia Salatti and students of the University of South Carolina

As I spoke about language access and shared patient stories from my own experiences, I felt a shift. Advocacy didn't feel distant or procedural; **it felt personal.**

It reminded me that my role as a fellow is not only to learn from systems, but to challenge them, to help carry the lived experiences of patients into policy conversations that often overlook them.

That day, I understood that advocacy isn't just about lobbying — it's about standing in the gap between patients and policymakers, ensuring that compassion and justice remain at the center of healthcare reform.

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Center Stage: Language Access at the NAFC Conference

That realization came full circle when I presented at the National Association of Free and Charitable Clinics (NAFC) Annual Conference. My session, "Lost in Translation," explored how language barriers impact patient outcomes and why language access is not "nice to have," but a core component of quality care.

Standing on that stage, I felt the weight of what this fellowship had already given me — the confidence to take lessons learned in small community spaces and bring them to a national audience



Pictured: Dr. Charys Demery presenting at the NAFC Conference in Denver, Colorado

I spoke about real cases where miscommunication altered the course of care and about practical solutions: using trained interpreters, adopting culturally competent practices, and creating inclusive language access policies.

What moved me most was the response. Providers from across the country shared their own struggles and successes, and for the first time, I saw how universal this issue really is. It reinforced my belief that improving access means not only expanding who receives care but also ensuring that everyone can understand and trust the care they receive.

Looking Ahead: Finding My Rhythm



As I reflect on my first 90 days, I've learned that impact happens at many levels: through policies that change systems, through programs that empower people, and through voices that challenge the status quo.

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This journey has shown me that health equity is not achieved through one event or one program — it's built over time, through persistence and purpose. I'm learning to find my rhythm in this marathon and I'm excited to keep running toward a more equitable future for all.

"I am no longer accepting the things I cannot change. I am changing the things I cannot accept." ----- Angela Davis

Who am I?



Dr. Charys Demery is a recent graduate from Howard University College of Pharmacy, where she earned her Doctorate of Pharmacy. She is currently completing a 1 year fellowship program with NOVA Scripts Central and American Pharmacist Association (APhA). Through her fellowship, she works alongside community partners across Northern Virginia to address health disparities, strengthen language access, and advance equitable care for underserved populations.

Her work focuses on bridging the gap between community engagement, health education, and policy advocacy one step at a time in the marathon toward health equity.

Thank you for reading!

Stay tuned for more Nightingale News as I continue my journey as a Safety-Net Health Equity Fellowship with NOVA ScriptsCentral and the American Pharmacists Association...