Nightingale News

Written by: Charys Demery, PharmD
Blog Post 4, Page 1
May 19th, 2026



Pace and Presence: What It Means to Keep Showing Up

As my fellowship journey continues, I've started to realize that growth is not always about moving faster. Sometimes, growth is about becoming more intentional with where you place your energy, your voice, and your presence. The early months of my fellowship felt like a sprint. I was focused on learning, adjusting, and trying to keep pace with every new opportunity and experience coming my way. Then came finding my rhythm. Learning how to navigate community work, leadership spaces, and public health conversations with more confidence and purpose.

Now, I find myself thinking less about speed and more about presence.

I've learned that showing up matters. Not just physically showing up, but understanding the impact of being present in spaces where conversations about health equity, advocacy, and community are taking place. Whether in churches, community centers, policy discussions, or national conferences, I continue to see how meaningful change happens when people feel seen, heard, and represented.

Over the past several months, I have had the opportunity to move through many different spaces focused on improving health outcomes within underserved communities. With each experience, I've started to understand something more clearly: representation matters. Sometimes the most impactful part of showing up is allowing people to see themselves reflected in the individuals leading the conversation.

I've also started to recognize how much these experiences have changed me personally. Earlier in my fellowship, I often walked into rooms questioning whether I truly belonged there. I would focus on learning quietly, observing others, and trying to prove myself. But lately, I've noticed a shift. I've become more confident not only in the work I do, but in the perspective I bring into these spaces.

And in many ways, this stage of my fellowship has been about learning the power of both pace and presence.

Finding Community Through Shared Purpose: National Minority Quality Forum Summit

Attending the National Minority Quality Forum Summit was one of the most impactful experiences of this phase of my fellowship journey. While I attended as a learner, I left with a much deeper understanding of the power of community, representation, and collective advocacy within healthcare.

Throughout the summit, conversations centered around improving health outcomes within underserved communities, addressing disparities, and creating more equitable systems of care.



Pictured: Dr. Donney John, Executive Director; Dr. Charys Demery; and Dr. Shabnum Anwari at the National Minority Quality Forum Annual Leadership Summit Gala.

Read more

Nightingale News



But beyond the presentations and discussions, what stood out most to me was the feeling of being surrounded by individuals who shared a common purpose. At one session, a speaker said something that immediately stayed with me:

"Community is immunity."

The phrase was simple, yet incredibly powerful. The more I reflected on it, the more I realized how accurately it captured the work happening all around me throughout the summit. Community creates connection. Community creates trust. And within healthcare, trust can often determine whether people feel comfortable seeking care, asking questions, participating in research, or advocating for themselves. For many underserved communities, especially communities of color, healthcare systems have historically created mistrust rather than safety. That reality made many of the summit conversations feel deeply personal. One discussion that particularly stood out focused on the underrepresentation of people of color in clinical trials and healthcare research. Speakers emphasized how difficult it is to create equitable healthcare solutions when all populations are not adequately represented in the data being collected.



Pictured: Our student Anjali Amin, Dr. Shabnum Anwari, Dr. Donney John, Dr. Charys Demery, and intern Shruti Kamath at the National Minority Quality Forum Annual Leadership Summit.

The conversation reinforced an important truth: representation in healthcare is not just about visibility. It directly impacts outcomes. When communities are excluded from research, treatments, and recommendations, healthcare decisions may fail to fully consider their unique experiences, risks, and needs. Hearing these discussions reminded me how important it is to continue encouraging diverse participation in research and advocacy efforts so healthcare solutions can better reflect the populations they are intended to serve. Beyond the educational sessions, the summit also impacted me on a personal level. Walking into rooms filled with professionals, advocates, and leaders who looked like me felt empowering in a way that is difficult to fully describe. For so long, many of these spaces felt intimidating to me. I often questioned whether I truly belonged in conversations surrounding public health, policy, and healthcare leadership. But throughout the summit, I found myself feeling something different: comfort. For the first time, I stopped focusing on whether I belonged in the room and started appreciating what it meant to simply be present in it. Being surrounded by individuals who shared similar passions, experiences, and goals reminded me that there is power in community and purpose in showing up.
That experience continued to reinforce something I have been learning throughout this fellowship journey: sometimes representation matters not only because people need to see you, but because you also need to see yourself reflected in the spaces you aspire to grow within.

And in many ways, the summit reminded me that meaningful change happens when communities come together with a shared goal of improving the health and well-being of those around them.

Read more

Nightingale News

Blog Post 4, Page 3
May 19th, 2026



Representation in Action: National Coalition of 100 Black Women Health Expo



Pictured: Dr. Charys Demery with our volunteers Meg Kenny and Anjali Amin

That same feeling of community and connection continued during the Annual Health Expo hosted by the National Coalition of 100 Black Women. Walking into the event, I immediately felt the energy of people coming together with a shared commitment to improving health within the community. Conversations throughout the expo focused on wellness, prevention, education, and empowerment, but what stood out most to me was the importance of representation within those conversations. In healthcare, representation is often discussed through statistics or workforce numbers, but being present at this event reminded me that representation is also deeply personal. It creates familiarity. It builds trust. It helps people feel comfortable enough to ask questions and engage in conversations about their health without fear of judgment. As I interacted with attendees throughout the event, I found myself reflecting on how important it is for individuals to see healthcare professionals who look like them and understand the communities they come from. Sometimes trust begins before a single word is even spoken. Not only did I feel seen, but I saw myself reflected in the people we were serving. That realization stayed with me long after the event ended. It reminded me that presence matters because people deserve to see themselves represented in the individuals educating, advocating, and caring for their communities.

Returning to Community: The Ark Church D.E.E.P. Program



Pictured: Dr. Charys Demery with Bishop Carter, First Lady Carter, and the Health Ministry at Ark Church

At this point in my fellowship, I have realized that no matter where I go, I somehow always find myself back in a church. But honestly, that feels fitting. Churches have always been more than places of worship within many communities, especially within the Black community. They are places where people gather, support one another, seek guidance, and build trust. Because of that, they also become powerful spaces for conversations surrounding health and wellness. One of the most meaningful experiences during this season has been continuing to participate in the D.E.E.P. Program at Ark Church. What has made this experience especially personal is that my own parents are participants in the program. There is something incredibly emotional about standing in front of a room teaching health education while your parents sit among the audience listening and learning alongside other members of the congregation. In those moments, the work feels bigger than presentations or educational materials. It becomes personal. This experience has reminded me that representation matters because health education often feels different when it comes from someone who understands the culture, experiences, and realities of the community they are serving. Sometimes the most impactful thing you can do is simply show up authentically.

Read more

Nightingale News

Blog Post 4, Page 4
May 19th, 2026



Not only do I feel like they see me, but I see them too.

And in many ways, that mutual understanding is what makes community-based health education so powerful. It has reminded me that churches are often so much more than places of worship. They are trusted spaces where conversations, relationships, and healing happen. In communities where trust can sometimes feel difficult to build within healthcare, those spaces matter deeply. Maybe that is why I keep finding myself back in churches during this fellowship. Because some of the most meaningful health conversations begin in the very places where people already feel seen, supported, and understood.

"Service is the rent we pay for the privilege of living on this earth."
— Shirley Chisholm

Expanding My Understanding of Health: Food Access and Mental Health

Another experience that deeply impacted me was attending the "When Food Access Meets Mental Health" event hosted by Rock Recovery and Northern Virginia Food Rescue. The discussion explored the intersection between food insecurity, mental health, and eating disorders, while also highlighting how barriers to accessing nutritious food can impact overall well-being. Sitting in that room, I found myself reflecting on how much my understanding of healthcare has expanded throughout this fellowship journey. Before this experience, I often viewed healthcare primarily through a clinical lens. I thought about medications, disease states, treatment plans, and patient counseling. But now, I am beginning to understand how deeply health is connected to every aspect of a person's life.



Pictured: Our student Anjali Amin, Dr. Charys Demery, and Dr. Shabnum Anwari.

Food access. Mental health. Transportation. Financial stability. Education. Community support.

The more experiences I have, the more I realize healthcare cannot be separated from the environments people live within. Health equity work requires us to look beyond diagnoses and understand the broader systems impacting individuals and communities every day. That realization has challenged me to think more holistically about the role healthcare professionals play within public health and advocacy spaces. It has also reshaped the kind of pharmacist I hope to become. I no longer want to focus only on medications and treatment plans, but also on the barriers that may prevent someone from being able to fully care for their health in the first place. This fellowship has shown me that meaningful healthcare often starts long before a prescription is written, and that pharmacists can play an important role in education, advocacy, and connecting communities to resources and support systems.

NOVA Scripts Central Rx

Read more

Nightingale News

Blog Post 4, Page 5
May 19th, 2026

Learning to Take Up Space: Public Health and Leadership Conversations

As I continued attending spaces like the Northern Virginia Health Foundation Grantee Breakfast and the NOVA Public Health Conference, I found myself thinking differently about health equity conversations. One statement from the breakfast especially stayed with me: "Listening is not passive, it's a decision." It reminded me that community health work is not just about providing resources, but about truly hearing people's experiences and understanding the barriers they face.

I also reflected on how much courage healthcare can require on both sides. Patients often need courage to seek help during uncertain times, while healthcare professionals are being challenged to rethink practices, build trust, and respond to community needs in more meaningful ways. These conversations made me realize that the outreach and education work I have been doing throughout my fellowship is deeply connected to the larger public health discussions happening across our region.

"Confidence grows the moment you stop asking for permission to take up space."

Finding My Voice Beyond Pharmacy: Shark Tank Presentation

One of the moments that pushed me furthest outside of my comfort zone during my fellowship was participating in the APhA Shark Tank-style business proposal presentation. To be completely honest, I was incredibly nervous. I kept questioning whether I was capable of thinking beyond the clinical side of pharmacy. In my mind, I had always considered myself someone with "pharmacy brain." I knew how to think about medications, patient education, and healthcare, but business and innovation felt like a completely different world. However, developing and presenting my proposal challenged that mindset.



My proposal, Throwing S.H.A.D.E. (Skin Health Awareness & Diverse Expertise), focused on improving inclusive dermatology education and helping pharmacists feel more confident recognizing and counseling on skin conditions across diverse patient populations. The goal of the business plan was to create a pharmacist-focused training and education program that addressed the lack of representation often seen in dermatology education and skin health resources. Skin conditions can appear differently across different skin tones, yet many educational resources continue to underrepresent communities of color. Through this idea, I wanted to help promote more equitable education, improve patient counseling, and encourage more inclusive approaches to skin health within pharmacy practice. Receiving positive feedback after presenting my idea meant more to me than I expected. It reminded me that advocacy can take many forms, and that healthcare innovation also requires diverse voices and perspectives.

For the first time, I truly started believing that my ideas deserved space too.

Read more

Nightingale News

Blog Post 4, Page 6
May 19th, 2026



Bridging Community and Policy: Health Equity Conversations Dinner

Another meaningful experience during this season was attending the Health Equity Conversations dinner hosted by the NMQF Action Network alongside Congressman Raul Ruiz and other healthcare leaders and advocates. The evening focused on addressing healthcare disparities, improving outcomes within underserved communities, and discussing ways policy and advocacy can help create more equitable systems of care. What stood out most to me was how connected these conversations felt to the work happening within local communities. The same barriers discussed during policy conversations were the same barriers I continue to hear about in churches, community programs, and public health events.

Limited access. Mistrust. Lack of representation. Gaps in education and preventive care. Being present in these conversations reinforced how important it is for community voices to be included in larger healthcare discussions and decision-making spaces.

It also reminded me that meaningful change happens when advocacy, education, policy, and community engagement all work together toward the same goal.

Looking Ahead!

As I reflect on this stage of my fellowship journey, I realize that this season has been less about learning how to keep pace and more about understanding the importance of presence. I am learning that showing up matters.

Showing up in community spaces. Showing up in leadership rooms.

Showing up in conversations surrounding advocacy and equity.

Showing up authentically and confidently as myself.



Pictured: Dr. Charys Demery wearing a NSC polo

With every experience, I continue to understand that representation is not simply about visibility. It is about connection. It is about trust. It is about allowing people to see themselves reflected in the individuals working to improve the health of their communities. And maybe that is what this phase of my fellowship has truly been teaching me. Not every step forward has to be loud or dramatic. Sometimes the most meaningful impact begins with consistently showing up, remaining present, and understanding the power that presence can hold.

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 APhA!