

Farhiya Farah: Bridging the Chasm



Photo credit: Matt Mead

What happens when the knowledge and experience needed to address challenges are not available because the people who hold them are not at the table? This question propelled Farhiya Farah to apply for a Bush Fellowship, through which she completed her Ph.D. in Environmental Health Science, and later became the Public Health Program Director and an Assistant Professor at Saint Mary's University in Minneapolis, Minnesota.

Farhiya emigrated from Somalia to the United States after completing high school nearly three decades ago and began a trajectory that alternated between increasing her education and working in the field of public health. When Farhiya first arrived in the United States in her late teens, she began working at a Wendy's restaurant and saved \$600 to take a three-month

community college course to become a Certified Nursing Assistant (CNA). She

found work at a nursing home and doubled her hourly wage with one educational investment. This experience showed Farhiya the power of education. It led her to continue her education with a bachelor's degree in molecular and cellular biology, in turn leading to a position as a health inspector with the City of Minneapolis.¹ Many of Farhiya's colleagues at the City had Master of Public Health (MPH) degrees, which inspired Farhiya to continue her education and pursue an MPH. During this program, she began to forge some of the ideas that have shaped the overarching goals of her work. Through observing the research projects of her colleagues and how they connected to the communities in which they worked, she saw that solutions to community challenges are often informed through academic research. Yet she saw that **community-held knowledge and wisdom are often not represented in academia, so that wisdom and knowledge of the community is not available to become part of the solution.**

Farhiya turned her ambition toward the goal of **bridging the chasm between community-held wisdom and the systems that make change in our society**, whether those systems are academic research, governmental policies, or ways of teaching and learning. Farhiya was a Bush Fellow in 2009. Since that time, she has had a major impact in several areas of public health, causing systems-level ripple effects that have spread beyond public health to improving government-community relations and economic opportunity in communities and influencing a new generation of public health professionals. This work promotes equity, reduces disparities, and improves systems throughout Minnesota. Farhiya does this through three primary avenues: **increasing cultural understandings**, advocating for **inclusive representation** in organizations and systems that impact change, and **collaborating** with people in personal and professional networks.

"I came to a realization that if the communities that are struggling with these challenges are not making it to academia, then academia is not receiving insights through the community to define those research questions... [So] **how can we make community wisdom as part of that knowledge train, to inform the theories that we're generating?**" – Farhiya Farah

¹ "Farhiya Farah: A Career of Intention, A Life of Excellence." *Reviving Sisterhood*, n.d. <https://www.revivingsisterhood.org/farhiya-farah>

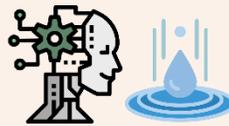
Farhiya influences and equips others by **increasing cultural understandings**.

Farhiya bridges the chasm between communities by increasing understandings of community-specific cultural practices and traditions in contexts including governmental regulation and healthcare research. This work has impacts on multiple levels. On the individual level, it can reduce biases and expand worldviews. It can also improve understandings and relationships between those holding power, such as governmental



inspectors or researchers, and those in communities that are not part of the dominant culture, such as recent immigrant communities. **This impact has ripple effects that extend to a systems level with the potential for broad societal benefits:** For example, Farhiya's work in

increasing cultural understandings in public health work led to greater participation of immigrant communities in the research, which led to broader health education within participating communities. This has the potential to improve health behaviors and health outcomes of these communities. In addition, the work and research included a broader range of participants from different cultural backgrounds, which leads to more inclusive and comprehensive research results that have the potential to be used in future academic work.



Farhiya taught the Minneapolis Health Department how Somali cultural context can shape Somali business owners' approach to food safety. This helps the Health Department better communicate with businesses, improving compliance and reducing violations. This has the ripple effect of leading to safer food in restaurants and daycare facilities for communities, and better economic outcomes for businesses, improving the health of the entire community on multiple levels.

Farhiya advocates for **representation in creating the systems** that shape our world.

The systems that shape our day-to-day lives come in many forms, ranging from the standardized test that determines whether a business gains a statutorily required certification to the curricula that make up our educational programs, such as the Master of Public Health coursework that shapes the knowledge and understandings of future professionals in the field. For people to be able to understand and engage with these systems, the systems must be informed by people from all our communities, reflecting a range of lived



Farhiya redesigned a state-level food manager training to be culturally and linguistically relevant for Somali communities. She holds the course in Somali rather than English, uses examples relevant to Somali food culture, and schedules class breaks at Islamic prayer times so students who wish to pray don't miss class materials. In the three years that she's been offering the course, 144 people representing over 50 businesses have passed the exam. This individual-level impact has potential systems-level ripple effects of strengthening Somali businesses and providing a model for making food manager training more accessible for other immigrant communities.

experiences and ways of understanding. Farhiya advocates for broad representation through all her work: She designed a cultural consulting model used by the Minnesota Department of Human Services (DHS) to enlist experts from culturally-specific communities to shape programming. She used her own understanding of Somali culture and language to create a food manager certification training that is more relevant and accessible for Somali communities. In the academic arena, she influences the Saint Mary's University Master of Public Health curriculum to be more inclusive of different communities' experiences, providing a stronger social justice lens. This work has impacts on the individual level, such as helping Somali business owners pass a standardized test to receive food manager certification or attracting students from numerous communities. **It also has great potential to have ripple effects on a systems level.** As noted above, more business owners with food manager certification can lead to safer food establishments, stronger businesses, and better health and economic outcomes. And a more diverse pool of Master of Public Health graduates trained with a social justice lens has the potential to positively shape public health institutions and policy into the future.



Farhiya maximizes impact by **collaborating with people in networks.**

Farhiya highly values and strategically uses relationships, which, in her words, strengthen her ability to penetrate systems. A self-proclaimed “people collector,” Farhiya builds on existing relationships and creates new connections to help people from different backgrounds collaborate to improve systems. She is recognized by colleagues in public health, local and state government agencies, and academia for her ability to connect people with diverse and complementary knowledge and experiences to work together to achieve better outcomes. For example, in helping governmental food inspectors better understand cultural practices of the Somali business owners with whom they were working, Farhiya emphasized the value of building closer relationships with business owners. Although relationship building was not a typical practice within the otherwise transactional food inspection process, Farhiya assured inspectors that closer relationships would improve their ability to productively work together with Somali business owners and help reduce potential biases and fears among inspectors and business owners alike. As discussed below, inspectors in Minneapolis and St. Cloud have found this to be the case.



As a study team member of a National Institutes of Health system science study examining prevalence of cardiovascular diseases of Somalis living in the Twin Cities metro area, Farhiya used networks and relationships to build trust within the Somali community. She helped identify “gatekeepers” to build connections and trust between community members and researchers. This contributed to the success of the research study and led to participation of over 1,100 individuals from the Twin Cities Somali communities. The success of this research has systems-level ripple effects through increased community health education, more robust research findings, and the potential for improved community health.

The Bush Fellowship helped Farhiya pause, strategize, and redefine herself.

Farhiya began her Bush Fellowship in 2009. Prior to the Bush Fellowship, Farhiya had been involved in many initiatives and efforts for community empowerment and inclusion, generally with a public health lens, and had a busy personal and family life caring for her children and parents. Being a Bush Fellow gave her the opportunity to invest in herself, take the time to seek self-discovery and explore her passions, and learn to strategize the best use of her energies. In Farhiya's words:

Pausing to look within:

"What the Bush Fellowship really did was invest in me and my passion for change. Lots of self-discovery. It clicked the pause button for me, and said, 'Okay, Farhiya, what do you really want to do? Where do you want to take your life?' That, in itself, was a huge gift. [That pause, what it did was provide an opportunity to look within, build my grit, my determination, and my perseverance muscles.](#)"

Farhiya explored not only what she wanted for her career and the changes she aspired to bring about through her career, but she also reflected on what she wanted to achieve before her death, whenever that would be. She described the process as not only personal, but also spiritual. Farhiya's connection to her spiritual life was already informing her approach to everything she did personally and professionally. She described it as "a bigger accountability...shaping everything I do from the moment I wake up to the time I sleep." The additional time and support around personal reflection through the Program helped Farhiya tune in to her values even more closely and use that knowledge to shape her next steps.

Learning to strategize:

"[One of the things that \[my Bush Fellowship coach\] identified right off the bat was that I was doing too much.](#) I was serving in task forces, I was going to board meetings, I was active in my children's PTA, and had a lot of other community stuff I was doing—I was pretty engaged with the political process. I hardly had time to breathe, and that psychological space to sit and reflect was not there at all, before Bush."

Farhiya's coach helped her learn to choose what opportunities to say 'yes' to through the filter of how it would help her achieve her vision. Posing the question, "How do you want to move the pendulum," Farhiya's coach helped her tune in to what activities would actually move the dial on her goals and learn to say 'no' to those that would not serve her goals.

Redefining the self:

"[Today, I'm a calmer, collected, intentional, more authentic person. I'm not restless, and I'm not all over the place...because I have a plan.](#) This is the plan, this is the work. The process of eliminating, and focusing, and being intentional, and realizing time management is not about taking the tour de force...I learned to redefine time management as 'what are my values?'"

In strategizing to redefine her approach, Farhiya learned that, although she may still be highly engaged and very busy, she has the time to devote to what is truly important for her: spiritual health, building relationships, and in her own words, “Being real to who I am, that will serve the work that I intend to do.”

With this focus, Farhiya works to **influence systems to be more equitable by increasing cultural understandings, representation, and collaboration** across several areas of public health, with broad ripple effects that extend into increasing economic opportunity and creating more inclusion in the systems that shape our society. She currently is the Public Health Program Director and an Assistant Professor in the Public Health program at Saint Mary’s University. She has also influenced systems and communities throughout Minnesota working as a consultant with the City of Minneapolis, the Minnesota Department of Human Services (DHS), HealthPartners, and numerous community-based organizations.



“I think that throughout the state, agencies are identifying people who can be cultural consultants and natural connectors who can help make inroads into communities. This is due to the DHS staff and Farhiya. In southern Minnesota, connections were made into the Somali, American Indian, and Latino communities.” – Donna Walberg, Former DHS Contractor, Aging and Adult Services

Reducing barriers to food safety can lead to stronger businesses and communities.

As Farhiya refocused her efforts on her passions, she directed her work toward reducing barriers and creating equity in the food safety arena. Minneapolis is home to many vibrant immigrant communities; and, often, jobs in food service or restaurant ownership are a vehicle for economic stability or prosperity for new residents.² However, Farhiya knew that many immigrant-owned

businesses were experiencing challenges complying with food safety standards and passing inspections. Often, this was not because of poor practices, but rather due to structural barriers in the food safety education and inspection processes available in the Twin Cities. Farhiya saw an opportunity here to increase equity by removing barriers to food safety through two avenues: first, by bringing **representation of community-specific knowledge** into food safety education and inspection systems; and second, by influencing and equipping inspectors through **increasing understandings of Somali cultural practices**.

As discussed below, this work not only made an impact for individual business owners and food safety inspectors, but also led to **ripple effects with**



² The trade publication Nation’s Restaurant News reports that immigrants own 29 percent of all restaurants and hotels in the U.S., more than double the rate for all businesses. “For many immigrants, restaurants are the American dream.”

by Jonathan Maze, Mar 20, 2017. Nation’s Restaurant News, <https://www.nrn.com/franchising/many-immigrants-restaurants-are-american-dream>

the potential for a broader systems-level impact: Better relations between government inspectors and business owners are leading to more compliance with food safety requirements and fewer citations and fines against businesses, and this can help strengthen not only immigrant businesses but any business in the community. Stronger businesses and safer food practices are a benefit for the entire community. Additionally, government health departments are starting to think differently about how they work with different communities due to Farhiya's influence. This has potential for additional ripple effects. Here is how she accomplished it:



Shifting systems through community representation:

redesigning the food safety training program

In 2014, Farhiya sent an email to the Minneapolis and Minnesota Commissioners of Health explaining that food safety violations in culturally-specific communities could be reduced by making food safety

“If you want it, go get it.” – Farhiya Farah

training more accessible to those communities. At the same time, she went to Somali-owned

restaurants and explained that, because it was election season, they could go to their city's town hall meetings and seek a solution with political candidates to the crisis of inaccessible food safety training. Business owners took Farhiya's advice, and the newly elected mayor created a small budget for a new training. The Minneapolis Commissioner of Health, who was also Farhiya's Bush Fellowship mentor, responded to her email and helped her begin a partnership with the City of Minneapolis. This new partnership had two goals: First, Farhiya served as a

consultant with the Health Department to be a liaison between the City and Somali-owned businesses that served food, such as restaurants, stores, and daycare providers; and second, she **redesigned the Certified Food Protection Manager (CFPM) training** offered through the Minnesota Department of Health to make it both culturally and linguistically relevant for Somali communities.

What was traditionally a one-day, eight-hour course, Farhiya broke up into two days. She translated the materials into Somali, making it the only course of this type in the nation in Somali. But Farhiya recognized that language translation is not enough: She infused the training with hands-on demonstrations and applied Health Department concepts to examples that are better aligned with Somali traditions. Furthermore, she created space to teach about how to understand and take a multiple-choice exam. The final CFPM exam is administered in that format, which is completely foreign to many Somali food service worker test-takers.

Minneapolis food safety inspectors expressed in a focus group that Farhiya's course changes have increased the number of Somali businessowners who understand the concepts required for food safety compliance. In addition, inspectors appreciated being able to refer Somali business owners to a course with a Somali language and cultural lens. That shift eased inspectors' frustration that they couldn't meet business owners' needs, an experience that was prevalent when they were only able to refer Somali business owners to classes and services in English. The language- and culturally appropriate course and other resources Farhiya developed have helped improve relationships and create more of a partnership with businesses.

“In [previous] trainings, people were giving up learning food safety. [The course was] 8

hours long, it's technical, and it covers everything. They know how to run food businesses—they've done it in other countries. Their community is satisfied, but they didn't understand the rules and regulations and culture here. Despite the fact they paid for the course and speak English here, they were giving up grasping the knowledge, but when [Farhiya] presented it in a culturally appropriate manner and bilingual it made a huge difference. Now, [they] get it. Now [they know] someone cares about [their] success. [Businesses] don't have [a mysterious inspector] giving them a long list [of violations]." – Minneapolis Food Inspector

Tawfiiq's story:

Tawfiiq has owned a business for many years, so he has experienced the CFPM training both before and after Farhiya adapted the content for Somali communities. His contrasting experiences are striking. Initially, Tawfiiq learned about the training from a local newspaper. He shared: "I was kind of desperate, scared, and afraid since the City was too eager to hand out citations without much credence or care. And I was oblivious of the requirements." Tawfiiq shared that he had received several citations, which became a financial burden. When he went to the training, it was taught in English, and even though he had difficulties following along, he was not able to ask many questions because of the quick pace of the class.

A few years later, when Tawfiiq's CFPM license was up for renewal, he received an email from the City of Minneapolis about a new training, this time facilitated by Farhiya. He jumped at the opportunity. Tawfiiq noticed differences right away. The class size was significantly smaller, which made it easier to have conversations and share questions and common experiences. He said the pacing of the class, with demonstrations

and plenty of time for discussion, was greatly impactful. He also shared that "Farhiya was gracious enough to provide us with prayer time. She would often give us five- to 10-minute breaks at exactly the Islamic prayer times without us asking for it. In contrast, I had to excuse myself each time it was prayer time [during the first class]. And while I was away for prayers, no one waited for me and hence I missed out substantially."

Tawfiiq now trains others in his business, helping new employees understand the essentials of cleanliness, food-borne illness, and proper food handling. He also shared that his improved confidence from attending Farhiya's class has led to a better relationship with the city inspectors; he's no longer fearful of inspections and sees the City as a partner offering guidance.

Tawfiiq credits Farhiya's course and influence with keeping his business open: "Without Farhiya's guidance, training, and mentorship, my business would have either closed or probably, I would have suffered a lot of citations. Certainly, I would have counted a loss," he added. "It would have been extremely frustrating, too, and stressful."

Tawfiiq's story is that of just one of Farhiya's business-owner students. To date, 144 people representing over 50 businesses have taken her course and passed the exam; each has their own story.



Equipping health departments and businesses through increasing cultural understandings

In addition to reducing the structural barriers and limitations in food safety education for immigrant communities, Farhiya has also created space to **educate food inspectors and health departments** about

opportunities for adjusting practices to be more inclusive. She has partnered directly with the cities of Minneapolis and St. Cloud as a consultant, and she has spoken at the Minnesota Environmental Health Association's annual conference and FDA Regional Retail Food Safety Seminar & NEHA Region 4 Conference about opportunities to be more inclusive without compromising the standards of the job.



Farhiya Farah presenting on cultural inclusivity without compromising quality at the Minnesota Environmental Health Association annual conference in 2017. Photo: Farhiya Farah

Farhiya has educated inspectors and health departments about Somali language and culture. This has enabled them to understand why they were experiencing some barriers and challenges and how they can better work together with business owners and resolve issues without lowering standards.

“I think getting more knowledge about culture and their approach to food and food safety... really drives inspections... We still have to follow the rules, but the way we conduct our business is understanding barriers related to the business that we are serving...” – Minneapolis health inspector

“Farhiya taught us to dig a little deeper and understand the culture, and [explore] why we were encountering the difficulties we were...It influenced our thought process – not

to jump to conclusions, but to look for alternative solutions... We would provide resources in Somali language, honestly it didn't cross our minds that a lot of these individuals don't read the language...So we're expecting them to do certain things, but...if we're not able to communicate we're not going to get compliance... Now in addition to providing written materials, we utilize other tools like translators and language lines. It proves to be a lot more successful.” – Sagar Chowdhury, Assistant Health Director for the City of St. Cloud

In helping inspectors better understand aspects of Somali culture, Farhiya teaches about the importance of personal relationships within Somali culture, suggesting that health departments and inspectors may benefit from thinking about more relationship-building with business owners.

One Minneapolis health inspector who had worked directly with Farhiya explained that due to her influence, the department now has closer relationships with the Somali community, and his inspection practices have shifted toward more in-person work with Somali business owners: “We are way closer with the Somali community... One thing that I have implemented... I actually bring the report ... and go down and walk through the report with them... the way I conduct my business is more personal...”



The St. Cloud Assistant Health Director described that the department's shift toward looking more deeply into issues before making citations—which Farhiya prompted—can mean the difference between a business succeeding or closing. This has implications for economic opportunity – especially for businesses that are culturally excluded from the inspection and enforcement system, but also for any businesses facing challenges. He

describes how this change in thinking toward building better relationships with businesses can help not only Somali businesses, but any businesses in the community:

“Specific to the food inspection portion...it would be the change in thinking: not jumping to enforcement, digging deeper, looking at the big picture items and looking deeper into the root cause of these issues. Honestly, the nature of the inspection program, we are an enforcement agency and that is generally the practice. If there are violations and repeat violations, we have to go to citations and, more times than not, they can’t afford that. When you’re going into citations, the business is at risk of succeeding, at risk of closing down.

[Working with Farhiya] helped us develop patience, a deeper understanding, deeper thinking in our program for not just East African establishments, but also for other establishments in general—what are the root causes of [challenges]? How are we not meeting them? Our job is to help them succeed, so how are we falling short?” – Sagar Chowdhury, Assistant Health Director for the City of St. Cloud

Gretchen Musicant, Commissioner of the Minneapolis Department of Health, points to the potential positive impacts of broadening inspection work to emphasize practices like relationship-building, deeper examination, and problem-solving:



“I think about the leadership of the [Minneapolis] Environmental Health Department and their perception of what is possible beyond the focused work of doing inspections—the broader responsibilities that can further the profession as a whole. The very tangible work that [Farhiya] did that is groundbreaking has fueled other endeavors on their part. The Environmental Health Department has now received a prestigious environmental health

award that is given in Canada and the U.S., and her work was a key part of that.”

Systems-change approach

Though food safety is only one part of Farhiya’s work, the systems-change approach that she brings to the efforts has resulted in economic opportunity and benefits for business owners, improved food safety practices for businesses and their patrons, and changed worldviews among government employees and business owners alike. In Farhiya’s words, “We have...systems, whether the agencies or departments, or health organizations, or housing, whatever it is. The policies and procedures that they have in place are designed clearly with the best intention at heart, right? To serve the constituency, whoever they might be. When you are out...in the community, then you see the unintended consequences of these policies and procedures...But when you have someone from the community who can go back to the system of processes and re-engage them, I think you create...goodwill to influence some of the changes that will actually drive the impact of the missions and the organizations, [which were] not originally intended to do harm.”

Although these specific partnerships with the cities of Minneapolis and St. Cloud have come to a close, Farhiya continues to pursue new opportunities working with communities on food safety. For example, the recognition that Farhiya has received for her food safety work with the community has led to a recent invitation for her to join the University of Minnesota’s Food for Health 2030 Collaboration.

Infusing services with a cultural lens can bridge services and communities.



Equipping state agency staff by increasing cultural understandings

Farhiya's reputation as a professional who influences, equips, and connects others has led to opportunities to create inclusion and improve outcomes in areas of public health beyond food safety. In 2016, Farhiya partnered with the Minnesota Department of Human Services (DHS) to develop and implement a model for cultural consulting to benefit DHS grant recipients. Specifically, in Minnesota, some communities experience disproportionate levels of dementia; each needs community-specific solutions. Accordingly, DHS developed a grant program to fund community-based organizations to reduce isolation and foster connections between the medical system and immigrants with dementia. To help ensure grantees approached the work with cultural competence, DHS brought on Farhiya to provide training to grantee clinics and develop the cultural consulting model. In this model, grantees have cultural liaisons to different population groups to support their work and serve as cultural consultants.

"I don't think we could have made the connection to the Somali community without Farhiya...She also teaches professionals how to frame services, so families accept help. It helped bridge the cultural gap... She also helped develop a cultural consulting model overall...We trained other people to be cultural consultants...Other cultural

consultants were East African, Hmong, Latino, Native American...and that widened Farhiya's impact...The training to the health systems enabled incremental changes in working with other cultures from diagnosing to services." – Donna Walberg, Former DHS Contractor, Aging and Adult Services



Donna Walberg also shared that the agency's partnership with Farhiya has had lasting impacts and broad ripple effects. Farhiya has trained additional cultural consultants and presented the model at the national 2017 American Society on Aging conference, which was designed to help community-based organizations connect with individuals. The cultural consulting model has spread to other state agencies and throughout the state, as agencies understand the value of having experts in specific cultural communities serve as liaisons between the agency and the community. Farhiya's work with DHS was highly lauded and went on to win the DHS 2018 Commissioner's Circle of Excellence Award, which recognizes excellence in programs throughout Minnesota that make a positive difference in communities.

"[There has been] a shift in perspective, and we now have more of the ability to look through the eyes of the immigrant person and see their perspective, and that helps us frame services and support in a more palatable way. The service matched patients with people in their community who understood them and were aware of cultural norms." – Donna Walberg, Former DHS Contractor, Aging and Adult Services



Improving inclusion in public health research by connecting researchers with communities

In 2015, HealthPartners approached Farhiya to join a team of researchers funded by the

National Institutes of Health to study cardiometabolic risks in the Twin Cities Somali population. The study aimed to collect a range of personal health data from community members, including blood sugar and cholesterol levels, weight, and waist circumference. But for multiple reasons, including the personal nature of information being collected and low levels of trust that this immigrant community had in a medical research system with which they were not familiar, the study was having challenges recruiting participants.

When Farhiya joined the team as a project manager, she immediately identified the barriers that were limiting participation in the study, and she drew on her network and skill in connecting people in order to move the research forward. She worked closely with the community advisory committee to act as liaison to help build trust between the Somali community and the research project team. Farhiya was able to connect people and help them move into key positions such as an advisory committee role or a health worker position that involved visiting homes, establishing the trust needed for the project to succeed. As described by Brian Martinson, Senior Research Investigator at the HealthPartners Institute, “As soon as they saw we had genuine relationships with people from the community they respected, that helped to establish trust in the community, [and] made it possible to do the study.”



With her personal knowledge of Somali culture, Farhiya also saw ways in which some of the research’s survey questions may have been pushing potential study participants away. Again, drawing on the notion that [the systems with which we interact, such as research projects, must be created with representation of community knowledge](#), Farhiya modified questions to be more culturally appropriate

and helped to point out topics that were too taboo to include. This likely also played a part in increasing people’s willingness to participate in the study.

Recruitment expanded rapidly because of Farhiya’s cultural consulting in revising the survey and Farhiya’s work on connecting people that could build more trusting relationships between Somali community members and the research team. With the trust that the team was building within the Somali community, participants were more likely to refer their friends and family members to get involved, too. Overall, the study included a survey of over 1,100 individuals.

What’s more, Farhiya was a strong advocate for sharing the results of the study back with the community from which the data came. She did presentations at local health centers and shared information in accessible formats. Farhiya deeply values information as a resource and insisted that this resource benefit the community that created it.



Farhiya’s work in in this research—bridging communities with systems through building personal relationships and using community-specific knowledge to inform how systems are created—has not only fueled the success of this single public health study, but also has had [greater systems-level ripple effects](#). Realizing the importance that community trust-building had on the project, the research team wrote and are seeking publication for a paper that highlights the community health worker recruitment process and the importance of building relationships with communities for biometric studies. [This has the potential to influence future studies in using similar processes to increase participation of culturally-specific](#)

communities in research, which can lead to more robust research from which the field of public health can draw.

As a result of Farhiya's involvement in this study, the Minnesota Department of Health recently invited Farhiya to join the 2030 Cardiovascular Health and Diabetes State Plan workgroup, which will develop a plan to frame work in this area over the next decade.

Teaching new public health leaders can expand impact.

In 2018, Farhiya began working at Saint Mary's University as Public Health Program Director and Assistant Professor. The university's focus on social justice helped draw Farhiya to this opportunity. She was interested in building on that focus and raising the level of attention given to health inequities in the curriculum. As noted by Susan Jarosak, Assistant Dean of the Graduate School of Health and Human Services, Farhiya has increased the program's social justice and health equity focus, which can have systems-



level ripple effects on the work conducted by future public health professionals: "She deepens the

conversation about what is needed to educate the public health workforce. In the discussions since she's arrived, it seems like we're talking more about how we can improve our understanding—and teach students to understand—social justice and health equity. If we can understand what these are, it can positively influence our decisions as public health professionals. If we better understand and permeate this throughout our curriculum, it will spread so people leading those efforts will have that embedded in their work."

"I have the opportunity to shape these courses and make sure that some of the public health experience insights are actually worked through. That this causes them to strike the social justice piece, which is exactly my life experience, [and] which is just an incredible opportunity. I'm very grateful." – Farhiya Farah



In addition to emphasizing social justice and health inequities, Farhiya also works to increase opportunities for community engagement into the curriculum, tying into her vision of increasing representation of community wisdom into the system of academia.

Through experiences like shadowing public health professionals working in community-based health centers, or talking with people receiving services, public health students learn from communities and bring these perspectives back into their thinking and approaches to public health.

Many of the program's students come from all sorts of backgrounds—many are working adults with families and come from different cultures, life experiences, careers, and interest areas. Farhiya has a passion for helping these students achieve their goals and dreams: She taps into her own network of public health professionals to support, connect with, and mentor her students. An additional benefit of community-based work is that it helps students more quickly build their own professional networks. With her success and visibility in the field, Farhiya serves as a strong role model for students from many different backgrounds.

"The program at Saint Mary's attracts a lot of diverse students that I know will be motivated and inspired to see a fellow Somali leader and educator running a department.

Representation matters. Farhiya is a role model, a leader, and pioneering in those areas

that did not have representation.” – Anab Guliad, Deputy Assistant Commissioner, Minnesota Department of Human Services

Farhiya views her role at Saint Mary’s as expanding the impact that she alone can make on the community by developing the next generation of leaders and shaping the

future of the public health workforce. By influencing the thinking of the public health workers to come, she’s broadening the reach of her teachings: that representation matters, people and networks are vital resources, and that understanding cultural practices and traditions is vital in shaping systems including public health.

Sources

The Improve Group created this feature in 2019 and, with the assistance of Abdullahi Sheikh of Multicultural Consulting Services, collected data through interviews and focus groups with the following individuals and groups. Abdullahi Sheikh interviewed the Somali business owners and translated interview protocols from English to Somali and interviewee responses from Somali to English.

- Farhiya Farah
- Farhiya’s former Bush Foundation mentors and other Bush Fellow colleagues of Farhiya
- Health department officials and health inspectors in Minneapolis and St. Cloud, Minnesota
- Somali business owners who completed Farhiya’s food safety training course
- Representatives from the Minnesota Department of Human Services, HealthPartners, and Saint Mary’s University

In addition, the Improve Group consulted the following secondary sources:

- “Farhiya Farah: A Career of Intention, A Life of Excellence.” *Reviving Sisterhood*, n.d. <https://www.revivingsisterhood.org/farhiya-farah>
- “For many immigrants, restaurants are the American dream” by Jonathan Maze, Mar 20, 2017. Nation’s Restaurant News, <https://www.nrn.com/franchising/many-immigrants-restaurants-are-american-dream>
- “Expert works with St. Cloud Somali restaurants to improve food safety.” Alyssa Zaczek, *Saint Cloud Times*, May 6, 2019, <https://www.sctimes.com/story/news/local/2019/05/05/farhiya-farah-works-st-cloud-somali-restaurants-food-safety/1101934001/>

The Improve Group would like to thank Abdullahi Sheikh, Farhiya Farah, and all the individuals who gave their time and insights to help make this feature possible.

Ripple effect icon made by [Smashicons](https://www.flaticon.com) from www.flaticon.com

Equip icon made by [photo3idea studio](https://www.flaticon.com) from www.flaticon.com

Representation icon made by [Freepik](https://www.flaticon.com) from www.flaticon.com

Connecting icon made by [dDara](https://www.flaticon.com) from www.flaticon.com