

CHW Profile Project

Kouzan Abdullah Physicians CareConnection



This month's Central Ohio Pathways HUB Community Health Worker Profile Project features Kouzan Abdullah. Our Education Director, Dr. Tanikka Price, interviewed her about being a recent graduate of Health Impact Ohio's CHW Certification Program. Kouzan shared her experience completing the CHW Certification Program and shared insights for others considering becoming a CHW. Read more about her impactful work and her inspiration below.

Dr. Tanikka Price: Hi, how are you?

Kouzan Abdullah: Good. How are you? Hello, Dr. Tanikka.

Dr. Tanikka Price: Yes, thank you. I am Tanikka Price. I'm going to be asking you some questions today. Specifically, we chose you because you were nominated valedictorian of our class. Congratulations for that high honor. We are so proud of you and everything you were able to accomplish during the class. That is why you were chosen as the valedictorian. I'm going to allow you to introduce yourself. So, if you could just tell people a little bit about who you are, I will let you introduce yourself.

Kouzan Abdullah: Sounds good. Thank you so much, Dr. Tanikka Price, for this. Thank you all for choosing me, nominating me, it means the world to me. I feel very special. My name is Kouzan Abdullah. I'm a Care Coordinator with Physicians CareConnection. In regard to me, I'm a Kurd from Kurdistan. I am very patriotic about my ethnicity. That's a little bit about me; still in school. So a little bit.

Dr. Tanikka Price: Could you tell me a little bit about your position at Physicians CareConnection.

KA: I'm a Care Coordinator at Physician's CareConnection. I have been with them for about five years. In August it will be six years. I started off with Step One for Healthy Pregnancy as it was just a pilot and we were starting off to decrease the infant mortality rate amongst African Americans here in Columbus, Ohio in this surrounding Central Columbus, Ohio. Now I work at their core, which is the medical part of it. I'm a Care Coordinator in the medical clinic. It's a free clinic on Monday nights. Located at 240 Parsons and we just take care of our patients the best we can. And I think we give great service and I know they get good service because they keep coming back. So that's what I do. I do care coordination as a wraparound, not as in, oh, you're sick. Here's your medicine and go. It's as, what do you need? How can I help you? How can I help your family? To have a better support system for our patients and some clients. So, I think that's a little bit.

TP: What inspired you to become a Community Health Worker?

KA: I believe like my love language after a long time, I understood that my love language is giving and I feel like as a Community Health Workers, we give even what we don't have, we give. If it's emotions, positive words, you know, whatever it is we try to find and give and make those connections happen. Inspiring me to become a Community Health Worker was that, to give, because there was a point in my life, in my community, and my surrounding that we didn't have anything, but we gave each other hope. I think I am that hope. I see in myself as a Community Health Worker when others have and don't have it.

TP: Thank you. So how did you hear about Health Impact Ohio's CHW Certification Program?

KA: Oh, my goodness. I've been wanting to do this program forever, but because of school schedule, life schedule, things coming up down, you know, all these changes, COVID, everything happening. I wasn't able to participate, but I heard it. We were part of HUB for about four years and it kind of, that's how it started. Every time I would put in a resume. I'd be like, oh, let me be in this cohort, and then I couldn't, and then I have to cancel. This was the final time that it was just a match, everything matched. It was my prayer answered.
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KA continued: Then I was able to, I think it was the day before is when I actually heard of this course and I signed up and I was in and I'm like, oh my goodness, I'm in. And I couldn't believe it. At the same time, I was doing these classes I was doing three other classes. So, I knew it was going to be challenging, but I knew it was worth it. I wanted those credentials behind my name, and I knew it was worth it. Because some of my previous coworkers and friends had done it and they were like, oh my goodness, it's mind-blowing. I was super interested and intrigued in doing it for the knowledge as well.

TP: Absolutely, and we're so glad to have had you in our class. Tell me a little bit, this is one of the reasons why you were nominated as valedictorian. Tell me about what other responsibilities were you juggling and managing during the 12 weeks of the course?

KA: I lost my aunt to cancer. Three-year battle. As we rested her to peace my uncle was stage four cancer as well. He still has not passed. He's still with us today, but I know that time's coming for him as well. The same time, I have my mother and my father that I take care of. I have my husband and my brother, and I am also a full-time student. I am in a dual program, and I work full time. So, I'm a full-time student, work full time, take care of the family and all the finances. I'm also a realtor and try to flip homes on the side. So, quite a few little things at one time.

But, you know, the fire has to be there and you just have to keep going. You can't give up. I know my aunt is in a better place. My aunt passed on Saturday and that Monday we had class and I could not wait to be in the class. It was the same time, Dr. Tanikka Price, you also lost a very close family member. When I saw you here, it was kind of reassuring that I can also do it. We were kind of in it, and at the same time, one of our other classmates also lost someone dear to them. I was like, oh my goodness. I'm not only when feeling this. I'm not the only one going through this, so yeah. Can it be here? This was kind of like my support system because I didn't have time for grief. I didn't have time for therapy. I didn't have any of that. But since being in this class, it was kind of reassuring and it was like, you could do it, keep going, you know, a positive motion. That's what it was. And if we're still breathing, we still got to go. So, let's keep it going.

TP: Yes, and we held space for those losses. We didn't pretend that it didn't happen. We didn't pretend that we weren't sad, and we weren't grieving. I think that's what was so important about you showing up, you know, is that we have to be transparent for our clients and let them know. We go through things too. We experience losses and heartaches too, but we keep showing up for you. Like we want to show up for each other. So, thank you for doing that.

Okay, so tell me a little bit about your motherhood presentation. I think for me, that was really a turning point in the class where I really got to know you on a more intimate level and you were really transparent, but especially now that you just let us know you're taking care of your mother and father, you take care of your brother and sister. What is that like in hindsight, looking at your motherhood presentation and what motherhood means to you?

KA: I did not anticipate that presentation for me to be that deep. It was a therapy for itself because I never really had a great relationship with my mother. She was my mom. I was her daughter, you know, whatever needs to happen between those times. That's it, and I feel like I held a lot of grudge against her for some of the things and then as I did the presentation and I had something else in mind. Then you were like, that's not what we're doing, we're doing this, and when I came to do it, I'm like, okay. Because if you were to choose, I would have chosen my dad because he's like my backbone. He is my spine, my cord, he's my everything. I would never have chosen my mom in a million years. Then when I had to choose my mother, I looked at everything. Who was she? Where did I come from? Then at the end of it, I realized if I was a mother, would I have done the same steps as she did? I probably would have. To keep my child safe.

I probably would have had her in boarding schools. I would have probably had to fight. I would've probably had to choose that battle. I think that was a big part of me. It was like, mom, why couldn't you just be a normal mom and not fight? Why did you have to be in war? Why did you have to do this? But she did it, not just because me, she did it for her grandkids.

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KA continued: That was when I stepped back and looked at it, she never said why she did it, but it all made sense at the end of the presentation. I would say, why didn't you carry me while you were fighting? Right. But she did carry me throughout the whole thing. She didn't only carry me, she carried her generations that are coming with her. To me, it was like, mom, you could have done this. You could have done that. But if I was in her place and I had to fight for my kids and fight for my grandkids, I would have chosen the same path she did and I would have totally fought.

She started fighting when she was 16. She was in war since she was 16. She had a very lavish lifestyle. She came from a very privileged family. She comes from one of the very well-known, but she gave everything up. She gave everything up and she slept in, we call it like the mule ropes, like where, where you would carry things on a mule. She would put herself in that and she slept. She had a driver, I'm talking about this is back in the day to have a driver. She had maids, she had everything and she gave everything up. So, the grudge I had against was with me, not her. And it was because we didn't have that talk and we never had that communication. But after the presentation, my whole view amongst my mom changed. It was the biggest therapy I could have ever paid for and it was free. It was free to me. This class was free to me and it was the biggest therapy I ever got because I've been trying for years to see what it is, and I finally understood it.

TP: This is something because when I heard your story about your mom, the three words that came to me were courage, strength, and sacrifice. And those are three words that I will use to describe you too.

KA: Thanks so much.

TP: So, there's this saying, you know Rosa parks crawled so Martin could walk. Martin walks so Barack could run. It's kind of like that same thing, like what your mom did, then you built onto that and you built into that for your siblings. They're going to be able to go even farther than you did and have less baggage than you did because of the sacrifices that were made in your bloodline. It's a lot to be proud of.

KA: Very, I'm very proud because our women have fought for years and years. We're the same women that fought against ISIS. ISIS people were scared of us. My mom comes from the same line. They're called pashmarga's, and I'm very proud of them. To see that girls are still fighting today, to protect their land side-by-side of men and more courageous than men, because they have way more responsibilities. They have way more things to do. There are bearing children and they're able to still do that to protect their land and protect their children. I have no words for them. I hope I can be one 10th of a percent of all of them. And now, I hope I can do one 10th of what my mom was and what she had to do. Although she doesn't talk about it because of trauma, but I can hear it in stories. I can see it for what she did and who she was.

TP: Yeah, and that takes me to the next topic I wanted to talk to you about. My grandma always says it's a thin line between genius and insanity. It's a thin line between strength and mental health problems, right? Because when you are carrying the weight of the world, when you are trying to solve all the problems, when you are always in the line of fire, you do take a toll. It takes a physical toll and emotional toll. So, tell me a little bit about how your experience has affected your perspective of mental health.

KA: So, mental health in our community, glory, in many communities. I shouldn't just say my community because it's many communities, the culture, the mother's strength, the pinpointing, so I can't just say my community. But what I have noticed, because I've come, I'm from a child of war and seeing war all around me, death all around me. It was two days ago. My dad was talking about Anfal, which was a mass murder. It was ethnicity cleanse that happened against us. He was talking about his cousin. It was a name that had came up and he said, "did you know I had a cousin who was murdered in that?" I was like, "dad, I never knew." He goes, yeah, in end of this, in that, and I was like, oh my goodness, dad. Then we opened the topic about mental health and he said, none of us, none of us has ever talked about mental health because you just keep going and don't talk about it. Don't think about it. Just keep going because you got to push it.
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KA continued: I remember one time, my mother, there was a helicopter. This was when like war was happening 2003 and stuff. There were those army helicopters that were coming, the huge gray ones. It went right across our home and my mom goes, run. I'm like, Run? Run where? Why am I running? She goes, hide, and I'm like, mom, what are we hiding about? They're going to bomb us, run. She's like, go to the basement, go to the basement. I didn't understand anything at the point, right. Because I'm older. I saw it when I was younger, but I haven't seen it ever since. My mom had thought that Saddam's people were coming and trying to bomb them again. So, to me, that was an eye-opener I'm like, mom, do you want to talk about it? No. Mom let's do it. No. Mom, do you want to talk to the doctor? No. What are they going to do? Give me some medication and make me addicted. Like all the other people that they're making addicted? So that was her understanding of it. But now in the community, now I believe education is the first door we can ever open for anything.

Educating people and having people understand the concept of what is going on is your first key to success. As long as these people don't have the education and don't have the understanding of it, this is going to be a loop that is never going to end. After a while we would put on movies, we would put on movies that were agreeing, like understanding, PTSD, understanding what trauma is, understanding this. So finally, my father was opened up and we did get the correct counseling. My mother still says no because she doesn't even want to talk about the events. Doesn't want to see it. She doesn't want anything to do with it. And I understand that because she's just processing it differently. But I've seen it in my father-in-law. I've seen it in my mother-in-law. I've seen it in my sisters-in-law. I've seen it in my whole family and in my community. Every time I'm like, you guys have to understand you can't judge them for what they're doing right now. You have to understand where they came from.

And slowly, I feel like every time we talk about it, posting things on social media you know, Instagram's, TikTok's. This is bringing more awareness because our community is not going to go and read a book about mental sanity. You know, like, let me see what my mental health wellbeing is.

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KA continued: They're not going to do that, but they are going to go on TikTok and it is going to come across them. It is going to go on Instagram or their social medias, whatever that they are using. So they will look at that, but they're not going to go ahead and sit down, take time, because they don't want anyone to see them. They don't want anyone to know what they're doing. This is a gateway, I feel like, and now we are slowly, slowly seeing the change in the community. I see the change in my family. I see the change in my father-in-law and I've been married to my husband five years, but slowly we're seeing it in my sister-in-law. Then we have like therapy sessions. No, I'm not a therapist by any means. I just give them what they are willing to hear from me first before they can get the right assistance that they need. If I am their gateway to understanding and softening this topic, by all means, let's do it. I'm more than happy to talk about it and let me know how I can help you. And I think that's came across pretty well.

TP: Amazing. I know you've been through the program now. We graduate tomorrow. What tools do you think you picked up in the class that are going to help you be a better CHW in your everyday workflow?

KA: Dr. Tanikka Price, let me be very honest with you. When I started this program, I was like, you guys, I'm just going to go ahead, go in it and then I'm going to be over it. I'm just going to get the certificate and be done with it. I know it all. All right. I've been in this field for so long. I've been to so many classes. I've been to so many trainings. I was like, I just want this degree and I just want this certification. I will call it a day. Right? Do not, whoever is watching this do not underestimate the power of the CHW program that they have. Do not underestimate it because I did. I was mind blown because I am so sad it's getting over with. Go back to your question, what tool? I can't say it's one, it was so many of them because every class piggybacked on the other one. Every class had a different agenda that you had to think about. The homeworks, where your thought was moving and if your brain is moving, that means you're thinking. Something is working, right. For me, every class my brain was moving. The past few classes, I couldn't even turn on my camera because I was sobbing. I was sobbing because the things that people were saying was affecting me so highly that I didn't know what to do.

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KA continued: How to proceed to the next chapter. I was just like, oh my God, I have to take this in. Having those breaks, that Tuesday, here's the break on Wednesday, here's Thursday have the break, that was for me to go ahead and re-review. Mentally to go back and look at it and say, what changes should I look in myself? Put the mask on you first, the oxygen on your first. Before I can give it to someone else. What is what I can take in before I can give it to someone else? Then coming into this class, we were all, we are all normal people. None of us were different than the other and everybody came with an experience that affected the other person in a different way.

Everybody had something to share because of someone else. It was the most eye-opening thing, because sometimes we're like, why me? But when you come to this class, it's like, why us? But then if you go take a step back and you'll say why this world? Because everyone is going through something or has gone through something. Then as Community Health Workers now, we have that experience under our belt. Everyone has a problem and then coming back, it's like, we have already mastered these issues within us, within our family, within our state, within our county, how is it I can help someone else? How is it when that next person comes and knocks on the door and asks for help, how is it that I can help them? I think that's the beauty of Community Health Workers because we're a community and we're in it together for the health and wealth, and we're workers because we're working all the time.

This weekend, like I mentioned it was our five-year anniversary. I went to a store. My husband loves tres leches cakes. So, I went to this little bakery on Sullivan Avenue and I went there because they have really good cakes. I went there to pick up this cake and I noticed this lady had, her eyes were red and I looked and I was like, my little broken Spanish. I was like, oh, tu ojos. She's like, yeah, yeah. I was like, no problem. Here's my cell phone. Call me. I'll get you an appointment. She looked at me. She's like, what? I was like, yeah. So, she called me on Tuesday. I got her a vision appointment. They got her in a physical.

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KA continued: This is what it is. We're walking bulletin boards of ourselves. She didn't know that I'm a Community Health Worker. I didn't need to have a badge, but that was my cap that I always have on. I know she needed help because I know she didn't have insurance. I know she needed help because I know in what area she's probably a part of and what community she belongs to.

That's who we are and that's what it is be a Community Health Worker. I don't have to be clocked in to work. I don't have to be clocked out to stop working. It doesn't matter. It's my phone number. It's this and the connection. The lady said she hasn't gotten any care since she's left home, which is in four years. Four years. We try to do annual checkups, this checkup, that checkup, you know how much you've missed out on? So, this is who we are. I think that's why in our group, what I took was everyone is going from something. I might've not gone through what they went through, but I went through something else. If I want an answer, I just have to knock on one of my classmates door and they will explain to me and help me for what it is. I guess, to go back to your question, what did I learn? We're in this together. We're in this together. Everybody has a different story. Everybody went through it differently, but we're in this together. As humans, we have to remember humanity comes before anything and I think that's what it is. We're all human.

TP: That's great because that was very validating for me because people often don't understand why I have a law degree and I'm a practicing attorney, but I work in the healthcare field training Community Health Workers. You basically nailed it on the head because I went to law school to change laws, to make all of these wise, sweeping, broad changes that were going to help people. Then I quickly found out that's probably not going to happen. It's going to be really, really hard to do that. The people that were coming to me for legal help were broken and it was too late to help them. So, it was everything that you said, really like going back to just the one-off, you know, the one interaction. Knowing that I may not be changing the whole world, but I'm changing one person's world by being there for them, by connecting them to resources and services, by being somebody who's consistent and predictable and reliable. So that was very validating because that's exactly why I do this work.

KA: Thank you so much for doing this work and Dr. Tanikka Price let me say one thing. I never know when I have to change my hat. And you probably right now, you having your education, you being an attorney, you being this, you're doing it in a different way, but you can change it at any time when you know, it needs to be affected and that's the beauty of Community Health Workers. We wear so many hats we're mothers, sisters, daughters, you know, we're XYZ. Our list goes on. If I go down all the schools and credentials and education that I have, but I never know when I need to pull that card. And I think that's why for you, when you guys were teaching this, it's like, I can also, you know, not that you are just my instructor, I can email you and say, hey, Dr. Tanikka, I have a situation. Help me. What can I do? It's communication. It's being one. It's being a part of a connected community and not a broken community.

TP: Thank you. That's beautiful. This is our final question, and it is what is one thing you would tell somebody who's thinking about becoming a CHW or getting their CHW certification?

KA: I challenge you. I challenge you to check it out, and you will be super amazed of what you didn't know and what you knew that needed to come out. This class has been the biggest educator in my life, and it is bigger than my student loans. It is bigger than all the instructors that taught me at the universities. It is bigger than any education that I've ever gotten because all of those were numbers. They wanted numbers. I wanted my GPA. It's bigger than my deans list, it's bigger than my honors society that I'm in. It's bigger than the alumni that I'm in. None of them, and those took years to get, none of them came close to what I have been in for the CHW class that I'm in right now. Since March, none of them came close to changing my view, changing my life and understanding the purpose why I am in what I am, none of them. And here's the thing, it was free for me.

I wish this course could be mandatory state wide, every year, and I wish a part of every class was every month one of this to be done. I wish this was something mandatory. The providers need it, nurses need it. Everyone, electricians need it. Plumbers need it. Everyone needs it. Everyone needs it because everyone is hurting in one way or another, but we are not opening up.

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KA continued: We are so busy in our life that we are not understanding the importance of ourselves. There are people that are in their forties, fifties, and some have even passed and still have not known themselves. People do not know who they are. This was one class that made me sit back and actually listen, enjoy and think about everything that has been taught to me. It was priceless. Priceless, and in the beginning I'm like hmm class, you know? But Dr. Tanikka let me tell you, I wish this was a podcast that I can go ahead and listen to. I wish every time I needed it, and I said that yesterday, I wish this was a podcast. I wish every group had their own memory of this and we could go back and listen to it and revisit it. When we needed that support, look back into it. Because right now it's gone and that's what's sad to me is it's gone. Those moments are gone and it's whatever I took in, and I don't know how much I missed out on. I wish it was like a book. I wish it was something I could reopen and go look at it again and be like this day, I felt this, let me click on this video and listen to this. That was like two hours of me in a class just listening. Oh my God, and then two hours went by so fast and it was so sad. It was so sad. You are a great instructor. You are great, great instructor and I don't have a word. I would say that I challenge whoever thinks that they know better. I challenge you. I thought I knew, and I didn't.

TP: Well, I'm speechless, Kouzan, but also, I challenge you because everything that you described about this class, I experienced with my mentor. He is the reason why I'm an educator, the way that I am and the reason why I teach the way that I am, Mr. Amia, and he recently passed. Everything that you described is how he got me to learn, to learn about myself first, you know, and then for it to just pour out. So, I'm really overwhelmed, but also it's in you now. You will be an educator and everybody that you come in contact with, you're going to make feel the way that you felt in this class. A podcast can't do that. The charge is up to you now to take it to the next level.

KA: Dr. Tanikka, so he is still living with you, and you are passing on his wisdom. I am so humbled that I can have a piece of his wisdom with me that you have passed on to me. Thank you so much.