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Contact: Carlene Pavlos, Massachusetts Public Health Association
857-302-7023; cpavlos@mapublichealth.org

Martha Vélez of Lawrence Chosen to Receive Community Leadership Award *Recipient Honored for Extraordinary Commitment to Local Health*

Boston, MA – Today, the Massachusetts Public Health Association (MPHA) announced that it will present its Community Leadership Award to Martha Vélez of Lawrence for her outstanding service to the community during the COVID-19 pandemic and following the Columbia Gas explosions in 2018. The Community Leadership award is given to an elected or appointed official who has made a major contribution to the health of residents in their community. It will be presented tomorrow at MPHA’s virtual Spring Awards Breakfast. See <https://mapublichealth.org/upcoming-events/> for details and registration information.

“Martha Vélez’s career has been dedicated to improving public health in the City of Lawrence,” said MPHA Executive Director Carlene Pavlos. “Her work leading the community through both the COVID-19 pandemic and the Columbia Gas Relief and Recovery Effort has been truly remarkable and provides a wonderful example of public health and community service at its best.”

Martha Vélez is the Director of Human Services for the City of Lawrence, overseeing the Council on Aging, Veterans’ Services Office, Recreation Department, Mayor’s Health Task Force, and the Human Rights Committee.

In this capacity, she was responsible for coordinating the provision of a wide range of services during the COVID-19 pandemic, including distributing over 1.2 million pounds of food, providing tens of thousands of wellness checks to isolated seniors and residents in quarantine/isolation, and overseeing mobile COVID testing sites and mobile vaccination clinics.

Prior to becoming Director of Human Services, Mrs. Vélez served as the Director of the Lawrence Senior Center for 11 years. In that role, she was responsible for overseeing relief efforts following the Columbia Gas explosions in 2018. Among other duties, she managed the city’s first emergency shelter, oversaw the collection and redistribution of enormous quantities of donated food and other supplies, and coordinated the preparation and delivery of meals for thousands of affected individuals.

“I am delighted to accept this award from the Massachusetts Public Health Association,” said Lawrence Human Services Director Martha Vélez. “I am so proud of what our team here in Lawrence has accomplished in recent years. We are working hand in hand with all of the nonprofit organizations and service agencies, and together we are building a culture that puts the needs of our residents first and truly prioritizes treating everyone with dignity, respect and care.”

Through her leadership at the Lawrence Council on Aging and her role as Director of the Lawrence Senior Center, Mrs. Vélez has created a community-centered approach to providing services to thousands of people every year. She has also worked tirelessly to educate area residents about the benefits of healthier lifestyle choices. For more than 15 years, she has helped organize and run the largest Health Fair in the City of Lawrence, the “Fiesta de Salud/Celebrating Health Fair”, and she played a key role in developing the successful “Winning with Diabetes” program at the Senior Center.

Born in Cuba, Martha Vélez immigrated to the United States with her family at the age of five. She has been a resident of the City of Lawrence since 1969 and an employee of the City of Lawrence for more than 30 years. She is the proud wife of Fernando Vélez and mother of Tabitha and Sheldon Vélez.

The virtual Spring Awards Breakfast will be held on June 4 from 9:00 - 10:00 AM on Zoom. Tickets for the event are available on a ‘pay what you can’ basis, and those interested in attending can register at <https://mapublichealth.org/upcoming-events/>.

MPHA will also honor Michael Curry, CEO of the Massachusetts League of Community Health Centers, at the Awards Breakfast. Mr. Curry will be receiving the Paul Revere Award for Lifetime Achievement in recognition of his contributions towards achieving health equity in Massachusetts. Finally, the event will feature a special tribute to the thousands of local public health professionals and volunteers, who worked heroically throughout the COVID-19 pandemic to keep Massachusetts communities and residents safe.

The Massachusetts Public Health Association (MPHA) is a nonprofit organization that promotes a healthy Massachusetts through advocacy, community organizing, and coalition building. We are leaders in the movement to create health equity by addressing the root causes of health and wellness. We promote policies that impact the major drivers of health outcomes, such as access to healthy food, safe affordable housing, and transportation. We also advocate for equitable public health services throughout the Commonwealth. ###

Note to editors: photo of Martha Vélez available upon request