

# From Trial to Triumph: Bridging Nutrition and Public Health to Serve Communities

Meet Yanir Cedeno, 2025 Molina Scholar

**Yanir Cedeno, MPH** is the Culinary Nutrition Educator at SBH Health System's Center for Culinary Medicine and Teaching Kitchen in the Bronx.

*A former nursing student turned community nutritionist and emerging nonprofit leader, Yanir is driven by a deep commitment to aligning nutrition education with community needs. As a Molina Scholar at CUNY SPH, she's helping to reshape culturally responsive public health nutrition and preparing to graduate next month.*



*We recently spoke with Yanir about her time at CUNY SPH and her plans for the future.*

## What inspired you to establish a career in public health nutrition?

My career began with trial and error, but service was the constant. I started in nursing but soon realized I wanted to help people *before* they became patients, so I pivoted to community health and nutrition. In undergrad at Lehman College, I learned how food impacts health, but it was working at Bronx farmers' markets and hospital kitchens that showed me the gaps for underserved communities. I saw how affordability, language barriers, and cultural disconnect kept people from thriving. That's when I knew public health was my calling not just to educate, but to advocate.

***"At SBH, the kitchen became my laboratory for change—where I merged theory and practice to create meaningful, community-centered education."***

## How do you bring this approach and perspective to your current work?

When I joined the SBH Teaching Kitchen, the curriculum centered on a Mediterranean diet that didn't reflect our Dominican and Mexican participants' realities. I translated materials into Spanish and redesigned recipes using familiar ingredients like plantains and beans. That shift grounded my philosophy: nutrition education must honor culture to be effective. You can't just say, "eat kale." You have to ask, "What's already in your pantry, and how can we make it healthier?"

## Why CUNY SPH?

Representation matters. Early on, I rarely saw Public Health Professionals who looked like the communities they served. CUNY SPH didn't just value diversity, it centered it. The Molina Scholarship sealed the deal. My lived experience was seen as an asset, and for the first time, I felt I belonged in Public Health, with mentors and a support system to match.

**How did the Molina Health Equity Scholarship influence your path?**

It gave me mentors like Professor Luisa Borrell and the Molinas who pushed me to think bigger. I'd planned to stay in direct education, but they showed me how policy and leadership could amplify my impact. Now, I'm pursuing an MS in Nonprofit Management at Columbia University because systemic problems like food deserts need systemic solutions. The scholarship didn't just support me financially; it expanded my vision of what's possible for my education and career.

*The Drs. Marilyn Aguirre-Molina and Carlos W. Molina Health Equity Scholarship Fund supports students committed to addressing the social determinants of health in U.S. Latino and Hispanic communities. Learn more at [foundation.sph.cuny.edu](http://foundation.sph.cuny.edu).*

**You also received a fellowship to complete your fieldwork in partnership with the Rockaway Development and Revitalization Corporation (RDRC). What did you take away from this experience?**

Working with teens in Far Rockaway was transformational. We explored food justice topics like predatory marketing and food deserts but the real magic happened when the students led. One group analyzed corner-store pricing; another created a culturally relevant cookbook. By summer's end, they were pitching their ideas to stakeholders. That's the heart of public health: equipping people to be their own advocates.



***“What began as nutrition education transformed into youth empowerment. I saw the ripple effects of community-centered, participatory work.”***

**What drove you to seek another degree following your graduation from CUNY SPH?**

Initially, I thought I'd stay in direct community education. But through working with RDRC and the Molina program, I saw how policy and program design shape long-term impact. I want to work in spaces where I can advocate for communities like mine designing and funding programs that are sustainable, inclusive, and rooted in equity. Whether it's advocating for SNAP benefits or designing culturally tailored nutrition programs, I want to ensure communities like mine have a seat at the table. My MPH and nonprofit degree are tools to build structures that outlast any one program.



**Advice for future students?**

Stay curious, and don't wait for a perfect plan. Public health isn't always linear; you'll pivot, but as long as you stay grounded in your mission, you'll find your place. Find mentors who challenge you, ask questions, and embrace opportunities even if they don't fit your initial vision. Public health is about meeting people where they are, and sometimes that applies to your own journey too. Impact happens at different levels, and sometimes the most meaningful work comes from unexpected directions.

*Yanir's shift from nursing to public health was rooted in a simple but powerful insight: health begins long before someone becomes a patient. Her story is a testament to community-centered leadership and the value of lived experience in shaping public health solutions from the bedside to the policy table.*