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**PEN AMERICA TO HONOR SANTA CRUZ HEALTH SERVICES DIRECTOR MIMI KHIN HALL, OFFICER DR. GAIL NEWEL WITH PEN/BENENSON COURAGE AWARD AT 2021 LITERARY GALA, IN-PERSON ON OCTOBER 5 AT THE AMERICAN MUSEUM OF NATURAL HISTORY**

**PEN America Recognizes Hall and Newel as Emblematic of Public Health Officials Around the Country Who Have Fought Steadfastly to Keep the Public Healthy and Safe Amid Onslaughts of Disinformation and Personal Attacks**

**PEN America** today announces Santa Cruz County Health Services Director **Mimi Khin Hall** and Santa Cruz County Health Officer **Gail Newel** as recipients of the **2021 PEN/Benenson Courage Award**, which honors exceptional acts of courage in the exercise of freedom of expression. Hall and Newel, in speaking openly about the animosity and threats they faced as they mandated precautions to protect their community during the most severe waves of the pandemic, have helped bring light to the tumultuous journey health officials across the country have been on since early 2020. Not only have these public servants risen to this unprecedented crisis, they have done so while fighting an onslaught of disinformation and vitriol that has imperiled attempts to control the pandemic. They will accept the award at the **PEN America Literary Gala**, October 5, 2021, at the **American Museum of Natural History** (200 Central Park West).

For most of her professional life, Mimi Hall has served in the public health sector, combatting the HIV/AIDS epidemic in the 1990s; advocating for science in California's rural counties across spates of H1N1, Ebola, and Hepatitis A; and navigating outcry against the Affordable Care Act in these regions. Gail Newel worked as a gynecologist and obstetrician (delivering over 10,000 babies), and helped develop a lactation center and pregnancy programs for underserved women. Hall joined the Health Services Agency in the County of Santa Cruz in 2018, and Newel's hiring was announced in May 2019. The two share as colleagues an ethos rooted in health equity and a drive to save lives.

As Hall describes in an October 2020 Town Hall meeting, "Dr. Newel was clear and firm in her resolve that our early actions would help serve us and our community for the long run. We were one of the first counties in California to declare a local health emergency...and one of the first counties to have stay-at-home orders, absent any orders coming from the state, back in the beginning of March. I do believe that resolve and quick action helped keep overall transmission low for months." These critical restrictions, however, were not just met with dismay by those in denial about the dangers of the pandemic, but outright hate. After Newel had ordered the temporary closure of most businesses and beaches and prohibited most social gatherings, her inbox began to overflow with spiteful accusations and threats, and

a meeting she had held was shut down after a man from the community violently lunged at her, forcing the evacuation of the gathering.

At a news conference on June 25, 2020, Newel relayed a sense of frustration that ordered closure of beaches and other public places had become impossible to enforce, saying, “People are not willing to be governed anymore.” Over the course of the pandemic, she repeatedly emphasized that while she could implement various measures, “individual actions are the ones that determine how we do as a community.”

Hall says of her and Newel’s decision to speak forthrightly about the challenges of public resistance to public health measures, “We knew we had support and probably wouldn’t be fired, whereas many of our colleagues in the field could not say the same thing. For many people, if you want to stay in your job, you couldn’t speak out in the way we did. But Gail and I also had the conversation at one point where we both said we’re in a fortunate enough position that if push comes to shove we’re willing to lose our jobs to do the right thing.”

Newel and Hall have described fearing constantly for their safety and the safety of their families as threats and misogynist expletives were hurled at them, often from members of militias and white supremacist groups. Newel received chilling emails listing her address and the names of her children; Hall received a letter threatening her family and wishing her a slow death. Newel’s house was at times surrounded by protestors blaring horns, she was served papers at home by members of an extremist group, and the sheriff advised her to walk in public only if escorted. This was occurring even as they worked tirelessly to organize a robust public health response—one that has resulted in some of the lowest case rates throughout the pandemic, as well as one of the smallest equity gaps in vaccinations. Hall and Newel have also been credited with speaking out about the threats they have faced to outlets including *The New York Times* and *This American Life*.

Newel says, “Mimi and I share a set of values based on honesty, trust, openness, speaking from the heart, and truly cherishing our community and community members. We both see this award as being for all of the public health workforce and all the public health heroes—so many of whom operate in this way. The two of us have gained some notoriety for our courage to speak out about our experiences under threat, but there are so many of our colleagues who deserve the same praise. I know we both feel we’re accepting this on behalf of all of the boots on the ground during this pandemic.”

Hall, who tendered her resignation this September as she moves into the nonprofit sphere, says, “People are calling this the end of an era—[there’s a huge exodus](#), and many people are being forced out of their jobs. It’s not okay what’s happening now. I don’t think there’s any time other than now that I’ve actually been afraid for American democracy, and it’s highlighted and exacerbated by this assault on science and service. This award feels like a chance to recognize the under-the-radar work that public health officials and workers do all day every day throughout the world. I’m so happy that this award means that the work of my colleagues in the field is being acknowledged.”

**PEN America Chief Executive Officer Suzanne Nossel** says, “In a sea of denialism and pushback against credible science, Mimi Hall and Gail Newel are standard bearers for everyone who’s on the side of responsible public health messaging. As we recognize them we applaud the countless medical workers who have stood up for science and sound policy in the face of menacing public outrage. In so doing, we call to account those who have stooped to threats and harassment in response to public servants’ efforts to do their jobs and save lives.”

As PEN America brings back its gala as an in-person event, the organization recognizes that at the heart of our ability to overcome the illness, loss, and isolation of this moment—and begin to move towards a revitalizing reopening of our social worlds—is the need to respect credible scientific information. PEN America is monitoring COVID protocols, city, state and federal guidance and working closely with the Museum of Natural History in order to ensure a safe, inspiring evening. Invited guests who choose to attend the PEN America Literary Gala will need to show proof of vaccination and a negative COVID-19 test result (see the full protocol [here](#)).

This year's event is hosted by Golden Globe Award-winning actress, writer, and producer **Awkwafina** and featuring presenters including Academy and Golden Globe Award-winning actor and director **Jodie Foster**; Pulitzer Prize, Tony, Grammy, and Emmy Award-winning songwriter, actor, and director **Lin-Manuel Miranda**; and playwright, political activist, and Nobel Laureate **Wole Soyinka**. The gala is a highlight of the New York literary and social calendars, with an exceptional group of leading writers who sit among guests as Literary Hosts.

In December of 2020, PEN America held a virtual gala with more than 18,000 supporters watching an illustrious lineup of honorees and special guests, including President Barack Obama. The organization now aims to once again celebrate together under one roof, under the museum's iconic blue whale, with a VIP reception beginning at 6pm, a cocktail reception beginning at 6:30pm, and dinner and awards beginning at 7:30pm. The proceeds from this dinner are crucial to PEN America's dynamic cultural programming and critical advocacy work on behalf of free expression.

The 2021 PEN America Literary Gala will honor Emmy and Peabody Award-winning filmmaker, literary scholar, journalist, cultural critic, and institution builder **Henry Louis Gates Jr.** with the **2021 PEN/Audible Literary Service Award**. PEN America will recognize celebrated poet, screenwriter, and filmmaker **Baktash Abtin**; novelist and journalist **Keyvan Bajan**; and author, literary critic, and popular culture researcher **Reza Khandan Mahabadi**—all imprisoned Iranian writers and free expression advocates— with the **PEN/Barbey Freedom to Write Award**. This year's **Corporate Honoree** is **Robert A. Iger**, Executive Chairman of The Walt Disney Company and Chairman of the Board of Directors.

### **About Mimi Khin Hall, Health Services Director, County of Santa Cruz, California**

Mimi Hall was born in Myanmar, to parents who were determined to provide a future of freedom for their three children, escaping the decades of military rule, human rights abuses and violence against ethnic minorities they had endured. As US immigrants, her family held tight to the belief that their uniquely American privileges were also an opportunity to be of service. The values of equity, humanity and courage were doctrines instilled in Hall through her parents' sacrifices and have been the guideposts leading her through many years as a public servant.

Hall began her early public health career in the mid-1990s, working to combat the HIV/AIDS epidemic. Since 1999, she has worked continuously in California county public health departments. The last 16 years of her public health service have been as the local public health official in a handful of frontier and rural counties, before joining the Health Services Agency in the County of Santa Cruz in 2018. Hall served small, under-resourced local county public health departments with limited capacity and infrastructure during an era of the H1N1 pandemic, Ebola, the Affordable Care Act, and California's rural expansion of managed care for Medicaid beneficiaries. The fiercely independent and politically conservative nature of rural

counties demanded that she work with courage and conviction to bring all voices together for a common goal – better health for everyone. Hall was driven to do all she could to close the equity gaps in California’s public health system, serving as longtime Officer and past President of the County Health Executives Association of California, which provided access to statewide policy and decision makers. Her love for humanity and the belief that every life matters have driven her relationship building with other counties and her involvement at the state and national levels to advocate for investments in public health. It has also provided the clarity of purpose that has brought her immense fulfillment and carried her through the difficult days of being a public health official during the pandemic.

### **About Gail Newel, Health Officer, County of Santa Cruz, California**

Gail Newel, MD, MPH, FACOG is an obstetrician-gynecologist and public health physician with a drive for justice and equity in healthcare. She has served as a front-line clinician, an educator of future physicians, a public health official, policy maker and women’s health advocate.

Dr. Newel grew up hearing about the health challenges for the people of California’s Central Valley, where she was raised. She worked in her father’s pediatric practice during every summer of her teen years, accompanying him on daily rounds of his newborns and hospitalized patients. Her mother modeled leadership through service in the community. They raised Gail in the Mennonite church, where she developed a strong sense of social justice and servant leadership from an early age.

Dr. Newel attended UC Berkeley for undergraduate work and UC Irvine for medical school before returning home to the UC San Francisco-Fresno OB-GYN residency program. Her strong interest in public health led her back to UC Berkeley for her Master in Public Health degree, with an emphasis in Maternal Child Health.

Dr. Newel worked for over thirty years as a direct healthcare provider - in private practice, managed care settings, and as clinical faculty in the UCSF-Fresno residency program, delivering over 10,000 babies. Throughout that time, she maintained a faculty status with the UCSF training program, where she continues research as a co-investigator with the Preterm Birth Initiative. She served as Fresno County’s first Maternal Child Adolescent Health Medical Director at the Department of Public Health, then as Health Officer for San Benito County. She began working in her current role with Santa Cruz County in July 2019.

Dr. Newel has been active in policy and advocacy work at the regional, state and national level, with a special focus on underserved populations of women. Her areas of special interest include public policy and advocacy for health equity, family health, opioid use disorder, reproductive rights, breastfeeding and LGBTQ healthcare. Gail has also used her public health expertise internationally, most recently in Africa, serving with a community-based organization in the Democratic Republic of Congo.

### **About the PEN/Benenson Courage Award**

The PEN/Benenson Courage Award was established in 2015 to honor exceptional acts of courage in the exercise of freedom of expression. The Award is granted after consultations among PEN America staff and Trustees with specific relevant expertise on matters of freedom of expression. In some cases, outside expertise from PEN America’s membership, partner organizations, and network of contacts is enlisted to inform internal analysis and deliberations. All final decisions regarding Award determination and recipients are made by the Executive Committee of the PEN America Board of Trustees.

### **About PEN America**

PEN America stands at the intersection of literature and human rights to protect open expression in the United States and worldwide. We champion the freedom to write, recognizing the power of the word to transform the world. Our mission is to unite writers and their allies to celebrate creative expression and defend the liberties that make it possible. Learn more at [pen.org](http://pen.org)

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