



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
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Celebrating a Legacy of Leadership: Investing in Children, Families, and the Next Generation

Dr. Rocio Hernández to Be Honored as 2026 Woman of the Year for California's 8th Congressional District at October 23 Ceremony with Congressman John Garamendi

CONTRA COSTA COUNTY, CA — First 5 Contra Costa and District 1 Supervisor John Gioia proudly celebrate Dr. Rocio Hernández, who has been named a [2026 Woman of the Year for California's 8th Congressional District by Congressman John Garamendi](#). This recognition honors Hernández's leadership, dedication, and lasting contributions to children, families, prevention, and communities across Contra Costa County.

Long before becoming a First 5 Contra Costa Commissioner representing West County, Hernández's work was already centered on many of the ideas that would eventually become central to California's First 5 movement: healthy children, strong families, prevention, community health, and reaching families before challenges become crises.

Early in her career, Hernández worked in community health and prevention outreach, provided maternity case management, and served as a mental-health practitioner serving young people. She saw firsthand how health, family stability, early experiences, community conditions, and access to support affected what happened later in a child's life.

Hernández later served as a Commissioner for First 5 Marin, where she continued to connect early childhood health with prevention and community systems. Her work included a 2012 childhood obesity prevention plan which used the Spectrum of Prevention to address childhood health across multiple levels, including individual knowledge, community education, organizational practices, partnerships, and policy.

"It is remarkable to me when I look backward and realize how long children, families, prevention, and community capacity have been woven through my work," Hernández said. "I did not have a master plan for where my career would go. I kept seeing that what happens to people is connected to the families, organizations, communities, and systems around them, and I kept moving further upstream."

Relationships That Span Careers and Generations

Hernández's story is also one of enduring relationships, including her longstanding friendship with First 5 Contra Costa Executive Director Dr. Ruth Fernández and her relationship with



Contra Costa County District 1 Supervisor John Gioia. Both reflect a shared commitment to community well-being and investing in the next generation.

Hernández and Fernández first knew one another while working at Horizons Unlimited, a youth-serving organization. Their careers would eventually take different paths before reconnecting through First 5 Contra Costa, where Fernández now serves as executive director and Hernández as a commissioner.

Today, [First 5 Contra Costa works with families, service providers, community partners, and policymakers to support young children and their families.](#) In 2025, First 5 Contra Costa reported reaching nearly 16,000 parents, children, and providers throughout the county.

“Ruth and I knew each other when we were both much earlier in our careers and working directly with young people,” Hernández said. “Now we are sitting together in a completely different capacity, still asking how we create better conditions for children and families. There is something really meaningful about being able to see what happens when people stay committed to a community over time.”

Her relationship with Supervisor John Gioia also bridges public service and personal friendship.

Representing Richmond, San Pablo, El Cerrito, part of Pinole, and unincorporated West County communities, [Gioia’s public service has included work involving healthcare access, youth opportunity, violence prevention, environmental health, housing, and community well-being.](#) Over the years, Hernández and Gioia have worked together on community wellness efforts, including joint video outreach.

Their connection has also extended beyond their public work. Gioia mentored Hernández’s son, David Capune, when he interned in Gioia’s office. Today, the two friends still sometimes catch up informally when Hernández’s neighborhood runs take her past Gioia’s home.

“John has been someone I could work with on community health and then trust to spend time mentoring my son,” Hernández said. “Sometimes now I am literally running by his house, he gives me a bottle of water, and we catch up on our lives and our community. That is what makes this work real to me. Leadership is not something that only happens at a board meeting or behind a podium. It is also how we show up for one another and for the generation coming behind us.”

From Prevention to Preparing the Next Generation

Hernández, Fernández, and Gioia are all parents as well as community leaders. Their professional paths have placed them in different parts of the systems affecting children and families, from direct services and public health to early-childhood systems and county government. Across those roles is a common recognition that communities are strengthened not only by programs and policies, but by adults who are willing to invest time, relationships, knowledge, and opportunity in younger people.



Hernández's work has expanded from direct mental-health practice and public health into philanthropy, leadership development, primary prevention, organizational capacity, and policy, but the underlying question has remained remarkably consistent: What can adults and institutions do now that gives children and families a stronger foundation for what comes next?

Her service with First 5 Contra Costa brings that question back to the earliest years of life. Fernández has described supporting young children as a shared community responsibility and has emphasized the importance of strong partnerships in helping families thrive.

"We spend a lot of time talking about what we want to leave our children," Hernández said. "I think we also have to ask whether we are preparing them to lead what we leave behind. That happens when young people have adults who believe in them, give them opportunities, introduce them to rooms they have not entered before, and trust them with real responsibility."

She sees that principle reflected in decades of work with young people and families, in Gioia's mentorship of her son, and in her own philanthropy and leadership-development work.

Leadership Measured by What Comes Next

For Hernández, the 2026 Woman of the Year recognition represents more than an individual milestone. It provides an opportunity to recognize the relationships, organizations, mentors, colleagues, families, and communities that shaped her own leadership and to highlight the responsibility established leaders have to create opportunities for those who will follow.

"I have had the privilege of seeing this work from so many different places over the years, first working directly with youth and families, then through public health and prevention, later as a First 5 Marin Commissioner, and now as a First 5 Contra Costa Commissioner," Hernández said. "What has become clearer to me with time is that prevention and leadership development are connected. In both cases, we are investing today in something we may not fully see the return on for years."

For Hernández, Fernández, and Gioia, supporting the next generation has taken many forms over the years: caring for their own families, serving young people, strengthening community systems, supporting parents, shaping public policy, mentoring emerging leaders, and continuing to show up for communities they have known for decades. Their paths illustrate how leadership can evolve without losing its connection to the people and places where it began.

Hernández believes that may ultimately be one of the most meaningful measures of leadership: not simply what leaders accomplish while they hold a position, but whether they help create the conditions, relationships, and opportunities that allow the next generation to accomplish even more.



The October 23 ceremony will be held for honorees and their invited guests. Community members are invited to celebrate Hernández's recognition by watching the ceremony livestream: <https://www.facebook.com/events/1605098641295401>

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About Dr. Rocio Hernández

Dr. Rocio "Cio" Hernández, PhD, LMFT, LPCC, is a clinician, public-health leader, educator, philanthropist, and social entrepreneur whose career has spanned mental health, maternal and community health, early childhood, prevention, philanthropy, leadership development, and policy. She previously served as a First 5 Marin Commissioner and currently serves as the District 1 Commissioner on the First 5 Contra Costa Commission. In 2026, she was selected as a Woman of the Year for California's 8th Congressional District.

About First 5 Contra Costa

First 5 Contra Costa's mission is to foster the optimal development of Contra Costa's children, prenatal through 5 years of age so they will be healthy, ready to learn, and supported in safe, nurturing families and communities.

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About Supervisor John Gioia

John Gioia was first elected to the Contra Costa County Board of Supervisors in 1998 and has been re-elected seven times by large majorities. He represents 220,000 residents in the western most urban and diverse area of the county. He previously served for 10 years on the East Bay Municipal Utility District Board (EBMUD) Board, serving as President in 1995 and 1996.

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