

Executive Summary

*A Blueprint for Changemakers:
Achieving Health Equity Through Law & Policy*



Overview

A Blueprint for Changemakers: Achieving Health Equity Through Law & Policy is for people who have seen what inequality looks like and are ready for a new approach that will ensure that everyone has what they need to be as healthy as possible. This executive summary presents an overview of a new approach to reducing health inequities. It includes legal and policy strategies to help policymakers, practitioners, and communities dismantle systemic barriers to health and promote health equity. And it includes guidance for working locally and collaboratively to advance innovative laws and policies that benefit all children, their families, and the communities where they live.

To promote health equity through laws and policies, changemakers need an understanding of what health inequities are, why they exist, and how

they affect people's lives. The complete *Blueprint for Changemakers* includes a detailed description of 5 deep-rooted barriers to good health – the fundamental drivers of health inequity:

1. Structural discrimination
2. Income inequality and poverty
3. Disparities in opportunity
4. Disparities in political power
5. Governance that limits meaningful participation

Laws and policies are essential tools to close health gaps by dismantling these barriers and creating opportunities for all to be healthy.



Achieving Health Equity

For centuries, this country has systematically oppressed and discriminated against millions of people – most notably, people of color but also low-income people, LGBTQ people, and other structurally disadvantaged groups. This discrimination has created a wide range of barriers to health for people in these groups. Yet these people have also been denied meaningful opportunities, resources, and the power to change these circumstances. Either deliberately or unintentionally, laws and policies have enabled, sustained, and exacerbated this unequal treatment. As a result, inequities have persisted – and, in some cases, increased – causing dramatic gaps in wealth and health.

The complex systems that perpetuate historical racial injustices and other discriminatory practices must be replaced with new laws and policies that purposefully lead to health and equity, prioritizing those with the fewest resources and greatest need. To accomplish change, communities must have a clear set of comprehensive strategies that they can tailor to meet their needs. These strategies should start at the local level and use a Health in All Policies approach.

Law & Policy: Essential Tools

Laws and policies, having created the current systems that perpetuate health inequity, must be used to undo them. Creating fairer laws and policies is an efficient way to make lasting structural changes for large numbers of people. Laws and policies to redress our country's legacy of racism and discrimination are designed to express values against bias, unfairness, and injustice; influence the distribution and use of money, opportunity, and power; undo historical policy-driven harms; enable programs, initiatives, and investments that promote equity; and sustain change over the long term.

The Power of Local Solutions

When policy change is local, it is more likely to be grounded in a deep understanding of the health needs, community goals, and lived experiences of residents. This is why local solutions are more likely to reduce health inequities and create lasting change. When leaders make public health decisions without considering local contexts, concerns, or contributions, those decisions may miss the mark or even exacerbate health disparities.

In addition, local governments are often laboratories for policy change. As part of a long-term strategy for achieving health equity, local change can provide case studies and evidence of the success of innovative strategies. These locally driven lessons can set the stage for state or national changes in the future.

Health in All Policies at the Local Level

Health equity will be best achieved if change agents adopt a Health in All Policies approach to improving the health of a community. Health in All Policies means incorporating health, equity, and sustainability considerations into decisionmaking across sectors and policy areas. In this approach, the focus of the work must resonate with everyone involved, including practitioners in public agencies and community leaders from local neighborhoods, civic organizations, and the business community. While local Health in All Policies initiatives vary, they usually share the same fundamental strategies:

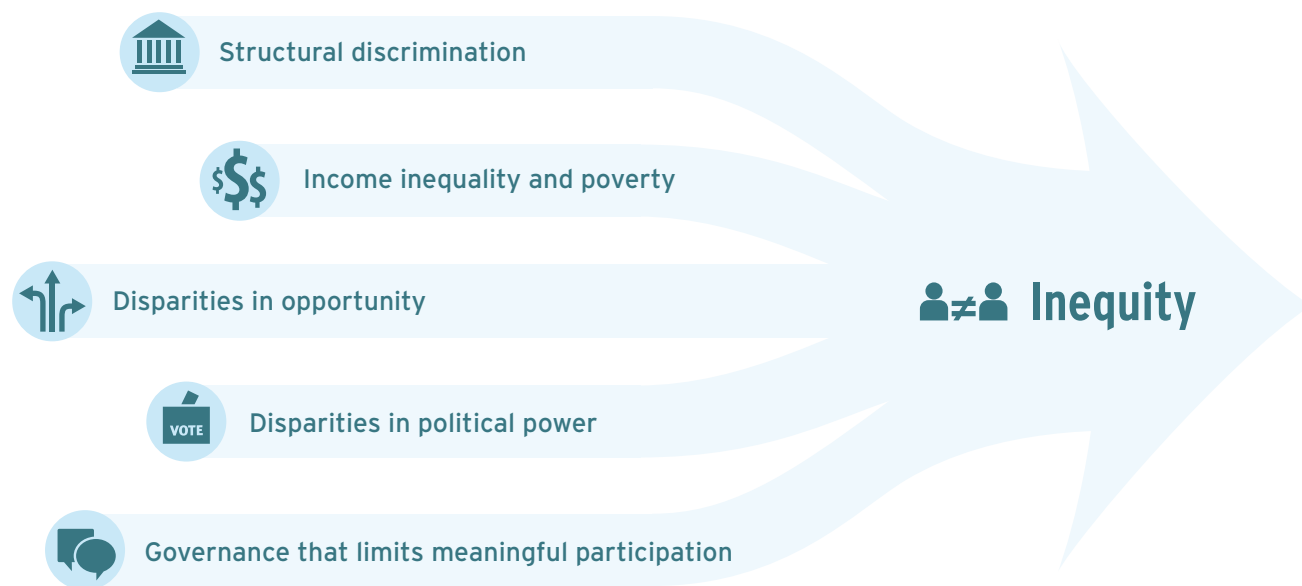
- Create an ongoing collaborative forum to help stakeholders across sectors work together to improve public health
- Advance specific projects, programs, laws, and policies that enhance public health while furthering stakeholders' core missions
- Embed health-promoting practices in the organizational practices of all stakeholders

Addressing the Fundamental Drivers of Health Inequity

Changemakers can use the accessible strategies suggested throughout this section to begin addressing the fundamental drivers of health inequity in their communities. Prioritizing a few relevant strategies thus provides a starting point in developing a local agenda for change to advance health equity.

For more information on specific policies that address the fundamental drivers of health inequity, please see the full text of *A Blueprint for Changemakers: Achieving Health Equity Through Law & Policy*.

5 FUNDAMENTAL DRIVERS OF HEALTH INEQUITY



Reduce Structural Discrimination

Reducing structural discrimination requires taking actions to minimize bias at all levels of society by confronting historical oppressions; teaching people to be inclusive from an early age; and exposing people to a variety of cultures, experiences, and perspectives on characteristics such as gender, sexual orientation, social class, race, and immigration status. Here are some potential strategies:

- Reducing racial and socioeconomic segregation by enacting land-use or affordable housing finance regulations to prevent housing and job displacement
- Teaching equity through school policies and curricula, to confront negative stereotypes and reduce racial prejudice and discrimination
- Reducing institutional discrimination by using protocols that require equity analysis or staff training on equity, bias, and cultural sensitivity to prevent biased policy decisionmaking and implementation

Reduce Poverty and Disparities in Income and Wealth Accumulation

Reducing gaps in income and wealth requires strategically investing in the neighborhoods and populations with the greatest need; providing support to individuals throughout their lives – as young children, in working life, and in old age; and providing financial protection against harmful or traumatic life events such as illness, disability, and loss of income or work. Here are some potential strategies:

- Preserving, protecting, and expanding social protections by providing supplemental income to support healthy living – for example, through nutrition assistance, wage subsidies, Medicaid, or housing subsidies
- Ensuring fair employment for all and providing workers, labor unions, and community-based organizations with the resources to implement effective and sustainable worksite wellness, worker training, and job creation programs
- Improving wages for poor and low-income individuals by increasing the income of the poorest individuals through supplemental income such as Social Security, disability insurance, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, and tax credits, as well as through an increased minimum wage
- Making place-based investments to improve neighborhood settings and value through community development or revitalization – including investments in housing, open space, transportation networks, food systems, and school facilities – while protecting priority populations from displacement
- Reducing the cost of housing, education, transportation, and health care by preserving, protecting, and expanding affordable housing; subsidizing preschool and college for kids from low-income families; expanding public transit; and subsidizing health insurance

Reduce Disparities in Opportunity

Reducing disparities in opportunity requires creating pipelines to success, increasing protective factors, and reducing exposure to adverse experiences for poor people and people of color across all ages. Early child development – including the physical, social-emotional, and language/cognitive domains – affects skill development, education, and occupational opportunities and thus has a determining influence on subsequent life chances and health. A comprehensive approach also requires recognizing that children are part of families, so effective supports must address family units. Here are some potential strategies:

- Supporting healthy early childhood development by providing universal high-quality preschool education that focuses on child development
- Improving the primary school learning experience in low-income neighborhoods and addressing barriers to enrolling and staying in school for poor children and children of color
- Providing lifelong education and job training opportunities by ensuring access to high-quality adult education and job training programs in underserved communities
- Improving access to safe, secure, fairly paid work and year-round work for low-income families through direct job creation, apprenticeship programs for those with barriers to employment, or fair-chance hiring for job seekers with criminal records
- Improving access to medical care through community health worker initiatives that strengthen health care delivery systems and produce a more culturally relevant health care workforce



Reduce Disparities in Power

Social inclusion and self-determination underpin health and well-being. Reducing disparities in power means that historically disenfranchised people are engaged as citizens and as professionals, working collectively to redistribute the power and resources that shape opportunities for health. Here are some potential strategies:

- Lifting up all residents' voices as part of inclusive, community-driven decisionmaking by using community-based participatory research, inclusive and representative community engagement, participatory budgeting, or public deliberation to involve underserved communities in initiation, drafting, and implementation of policy solutions to local issues related to health equity
- Building a movement by creating a broad coalition of changemakers and stakeholders to work for policy change that addresses the fundamental drivers of health inequity



Leverage Governance to Promote Health Equity

Undoing our nation's legacy of discrimination and segregation through law and policy requires new laws, policies, and government protocols that are written and implemented with the explicit goal of health equity. Here are some potential strategies:

- Establishing health equity as a goal of all local planning, budgeting, and government decisionmaking by formally committing to health equity through a resolution, health promotion plan, or comprehensive plan or by stating it as a goal in all policies
- Striving for effective, responsive, and sustainable action by revising policies, protocols, and practices in ways that both respond to immediate community needs and use resources efficiently so that investments and assets are maintained for future generations
- Making government responsive, transparent, and accountable by establishing inclusive, participatory, community-based processes as the basis for planning and implementation of health equity initiatives



Guiding Principles for Building a Health Equity Movement

Building a movement to improve health equity means supporting communities in achieving their policy goals. Using the principles listed in this section can help ensure that local laws and policies lead to equitable outcomes.

Engage Community Members

The process of changing laws and policies to create healthy, equitable communities must put the people who will be most affected at the center.

- Work with both government and community partners to engage communities.
- Ensure that engagement is inclusive and representative.
- Build a foundation of trust between policymakers and the community.
- Promote community strengths, assets, and resilience.

Build Capacity

Communities must take steps to generate the capital, expertise, and commitment needed to do the work.

- Assess whether community, government, and institutional stakeholders have the will and awareness needed to pursue policy change.
- Develop local leadership, knowledge, and skills.
- Build government and community partnerships.
- Align actions across sectors for collective impact through collaboration.

Understand the Roots of the Problem

Begin by acquiring a shared understanding of local problems as well as systemic issues that are causing those problems.

- Map both assets and disparities to identify patterns of inequity as well as available resources.
- Identify past and present patterns of racial segregation.
- Use data to describe inequities and disparities.
- Specify whether the disparities are based on race, socioeconomic status, or other factors.
- Focusing on processes that create fundamental change rather than on a specific problem you may be trying to fix.

Align Action to Solve Core Community Problems

This approach helps prevent resources from being spread too thin, pools capital for priority actions, and ensures that identified issues are addressed from as many directions as possible.

- Draw on partners from multiple sectors.
- Map out the systems and conditions that contribute to health disparities at the local level.
- Examine, identify, and prioritize upstream determinants as targets for collective action.

To learn more, please see the full guide:
[*A Blueprint for Changemakers: Achieving Health Equity Through Law & Policy.*](#)

Policies for Promoting Health Equity

Changemakers can create a local agenda that promotes health and addresses the fundamental drivers of health inequity by choosing evidence-based policies in the following areas:

- **Build a movement for health equity:** policies that advance civil rights, safeguard equal protection under the law, and expand political participation
- **Use place-based strategies:** policies that influence how the fundamental drivers of health inequity shape places and access to resources for health, safety, and well-being
- **Improve access to health care:** policies and programs related to health care, some of which are federally funded programs in which state and local governments shape eligibility criteria and implementation
- **Promote early childhood development and education:** policies to ensure that every child has a fair start in life and to provide social protections and support for families
- **Ensure fair employment and income security:** policies that promote equitable opportunities for employment, entrepreneurship, and a stable income

See the Appendix in the complete guide, *A Blueprint for Changemakers: Achieving Health Equity Through Law & Policy*, for additional examples of policies that can affect the fundamental drivers of health inequity in each of these areas. The Appendix is intended to inspire changemakers both to think concretely and to extend their aspirations about what local actions they should prioritize to advance health equity in their community.

Health inequities are deeply entrenched, and they are growing. Trying to shrink health inequities differs from trying to improve public health overall. It's a complex objective that requires new thinking and bold action. The Blueprint for Changemakers offers evidence-backed guidance on how to work locally and collaboratively to reduce health disparities. Working together, policymakers, practitioners, and community members can pave the way to a healthier, more equitable future.

About ChangeLab Solutions

ChangeLab Solutions works across the nation to advance equitable laws and policies that ensure healthy lives for all. We prioritize communities whose residents are at highest risk for poor health. Our interdisciplinary team of lawyers, planners, policy analysts, and other professionals works with neighborhoods, cities, and states to create thriving communities.

ChangeLab Solutions is a nonprofit organization that provides legal information on matters relating to public health. The legal information in this document does not constitute legal advice or legal representation. For legal advice, readers should consult a lawyer in their state.

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