HealthEquityGuide.org

A Human Impact Partners Project

Ways to Get Started:
Advancing Health Equity
in Local Health Departments

November 2017

How to Use this Document

We've grouped together a set of actions that local health departments can take to begin — or continue — advancing health equity internally in their department, across government, and/or with community partners. The actions are organized into the same four categories as the strategic practices you'll find in our Health Equity Guide, although many of them cut across all the categories.

For example, a health department may internally develop a report describing the social determinants of health, but solicit data and input from other government agencies and community members, and then involve them in prioritizing actions for the department to take to advance health equity. Or one health department staff person may form an informal learning group with other staff to learn about health equity and that may result in the formation of a formal interdepartmental equity team that works with other agencies.

Because these practices are so interconnected, we refrain from saying "Start here" or "Follow this checklist." Instead, consider these tips as you apply the Strategic Practices in your work:

- There isn't a step-by-step set of instructions to advance health equity.

- You will have to mold these strategic practices to fit your local context, and then refine and adapt as the context shifts.

- Use these strategic practices together, strategically, through an intentional and adaptive process to achieve your goals.

You may also be interested in viewing a complete list of the Health Equity Guide's Strategic Practices and related actions as a way to help initiate group discussions and track progress.

About the Health Equity Guide

HealthEquityGuide.org is a resource with inspiring examples of how health departments have concretely advanced health equity — both internally within their departments and externally with communities and other government agencies.

This website includes:

- A set of Strategic Practices to advance health equity in local health departments
- Key actions health departments can take to advance their current practice towards health equity
- 25+ case studies from local health departments that describe how they advanced the strategic practice, factors that enabled the work, impacts, and advice for others
- 150+ resources from allied organizations and others to advance the strategic practices

Human Impact Partners developed this resource in consultation with national health equity leaders and with support from The California Endowment.

We're in Pursuit of Transformational Systems Change

HealthEquityGuide.org is organized around a set of Strategic Practices that can be used to advance health equity in local health departments. These strategic practices are rooted in a theory of change that to systematically dismantle the patterns of othering and exclusion in government practice, we must pursue a wall-to-wall transformation of how local health departments work internally, with communities, and alongside other government agencies.

This inside/outside approach requires health departments to build internal capacity and a will to act on the social determinants of health and health equity. It also requires developing relationships with and mobilizing communities and government to advocate for action on health equity.

Used collectively, these strategic practices can help local health departments systematically address power imbalances, racism, and other forms of oppression which are at the root of health inequities.

Health Departments Can Lead the Way

This website is geared towards local health departments who are bought into the need to prioritize health equity, and who understand the social determinants of health, but are seeking information on how to best move that work forward. Health department leadership — including commissioners, division and branch directors, executives, senior program managers, and supervisors — may be best positioned to implement these practices. However, we believe that a wide range of staff have the power to start conversations and initiate changes that move in this direction.

Actions to Build Internal Infrastructure to Advance Health Equity

Action	Action Description	Tip
a. Create a team	✓ Identify others across your department interested in health equity and form a learning team to advance joint goals ✓ Organize a cross-departmental equity team to develop and operationalize racial equity and social justice workplans ✓ Ensure there is representation both across departments/sections and across different levels of management	Establish and use basic ground rules/agreements to create a safer space for participants
b. Develop a plan	✓ Develop an organizational action plan to advance health equity, being clear about who is accountable for moving the work forward ✓ Incorporate racial and health equity language in department-wide strategic plans, mission/vision statements, and goals and objectives	Engaging staff and leadership helps build momentum in developing a plan
c. Document inequities	✓ Document existing inequities to start making a case for more widespread action. Write reports that show disparities in life expectancy and other health outcomes by neighborhood, race/ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, etc. ✓ Describe inequities in the built, social, economic, and political environments ✓ Make sure to describe *why* those inequities exist, not just *that* they exist —pointing to historical drivers of inequities and making the connection across systems ✓ Include community voices in the report process — they are the best storytellers about what is going on in their own communities ✓ Use the report process to build partnerships and recommend equitable policies to address the inequities identified	Check out resources like County Health Rankings and the Equity Atlas for local and county data
d. Leverage existing staffing	✓ Create a 90/10 or 80/20 policy: if staff finish their work tasks in 80–90% of time, the other 10–20% can be used on equity projects ✓ Build health equity requirements or expectations into staff job descriptions ✓ Identify organizational inefficiencies and re-appropriate staff time and positions for health equity	Engage staff in identifying opportunities for efficiency and equity
e. Leverage existing funding	✓ Leverage existing and future categorical disease, prevention, and population health funding to advance equity via environmental and systems change policies, or to support staff development efforts around equity ✓ Fund local groups to do equity–focused policy work to advance community priorities ✓ Provide funds to support community participation (e.g. provide food, childcare, transportation, translation) in health equity-related planning and programming ✓ Hire student interns who are passionate about health equity to support outreach, communications and research activities	Engage community organizers in prioritizing new work to support with these funds

Actions contd.	Action Description	Tip
f. Use equity tools	Use or adapt equity tools to make sure your policies, programs, projects, budgets, and systems are consistently considering equity impacts. For example: ✓ Rhode Island's Equity Pyramid to align funding with upstream interventions ✓ Tacoma's Health Equity Inventory Tool to document existing work and identify opportunities to advance health equity and Health Equity Planning Assessment Tool to prioritize those opportunities. ✓ King County's Community Engagement Guide, Equity Impact Review Tool, Language Access Resources and Policy, and Implicit Bias Toolkit ✓ Madison's Racial Equity and Social Justice Initiative Equitable Hiring and Other Tools	Using equity tools can help identify concrete action steps to inform your policies, programs, projects, and systems
g. Survey your staff	✓ Ask staff about their opinions, experiences, and ideas on how your department can advance health equity and ways they might like to engage moving forward ✓ Use tools like the BARHII Organizational Self-Assessment Toolkit to assess internal staff readiness and capacity to advance equity	Engage staff interested in equity to help guide this process and know what questions to ask
h. Organize a training	✓ Screen equity films like *Unnatural Causes* and *The Raising of America* and use their guides to facilitate dialogue about the root causes of health inequities and action opportunities ✓ Organize a training (or series of trainings) for your whole department and/or leadership to build knowledge and normalize conversations about equity	Include a "head and heart" component to your trainings to build people's connection to the issues
i. Change your forms	✓ Include question(s) on population health surveys, clinical intake forms, performance monitoring, and program evaluations on topics like: housing status/security, employment conditions, income inequality, discrimination, food insecurity, stress, and other issues that drive inequities. This will help you get a more full picture of what is going on in people's lives and help you think about upstream change opportunities.	Solicit feedback from other agencies or communities about wording and how best to ask these questions

Actions to Work Across Government to Advance Health Equity

Action	Action Description	Tip
a. Engage other departments and agencies	✓ Meet with other agencies (e.g., planning, transportation, probation, housing authority, parks) and discuss their work, shared values and goals, and potential collaborations ✓ Convene a summit of health and non-health actors to identify ways to integrate equity across their work	Connect other agencies' mission of protecting and promoting public well-being to health and equity
b. Develop a shared analysis	✓ Partner with other government agencies to develop a shared analysis about the history and current context of social inequities, and the role that government played in creating these inequities ✓ Map health outcomes and connect them to the historical context of institutional and structural racism	Visit GARE's website to see how others are developing a shared analysis
c. Leverage your power	✓ Read public health law and leverage unused powers to engage in novel work that draws on public health authority ✓ Explore opportunities to include equity in contracting processes — for example, by ensuring that vendors/contractors represent local communities, have a track record of working with communities, and include explicit plans for community engagement	Connect with public attorneys to understand your statutory authority and how that can better advance equity
d. Share data and maps	✓ Share data on life expectancy, health outcomes, and social conditions with other agencies and elected officials to start or continue conversations about equity, the drivers of health, and why inter-agency collaboration is crucial for achieving health equity ✓ Work with the other agencies to obtain their data (e.g. on parks, housing conditions, public transit) and analyze/map the data in relation to health outcomes ✓ Provide data to agencies to support their priorities and build goodwill	Discuss how your goals are aligned and that the health department has resources it can offer
e. Work with decision makers	✓ Bring community leaders and elected officials together to talk about their visions for their communities and what resources the health department can provide to achieve that vision ✓ Organize walking or bus tours to raise awareness about how neighborhood and social conditions impact health and to make the case for stepped up health department engagement in other domains	Connect personal stories of inequity to policy changes needed

Actions to Foster Community Partnerships to Advance Health Equity

Action	Action Description	Tip
a. Build relationships	✓ Approach community organizations in your jurisdiction (especially those directly working with low-income and/or communities of color) working on social determinants of health to learn about their work, frameworks, the issues they are most concerned about, and potential opportunities to collaborate ✓ Engage and involve community members and organizations in your strategic visioning and planning, especially when that visioning and planning is about targeting social determinants of health and equity	Working behind-the-scenes to help others to understand and connect to government resources can be as important as visible work
b. Listen to community priorities	✓ Attend meetings of community groups organizing social justice campaigns related to the social determinants of health (e.g. housing, jobs, food security, education) ✓ Make connections/build relationships with local organizers ✓ Ensure that committees/boards advising the health department include community organizers ✓ Engage staff and community in prioritizing strategies to advance health equity ✓ Use group agreements/ground rules to ensure all voices are heard, not just those who are more outspoken	Showing up (e.g. going to others' meetings and events, not just inviting them to yours) is important for building relationships
c. Partner with community	✓ Invite local organizers to train public health staff about community organizing and engaging residents ✓ Use the NACCHO MAPP process to facilitate robust community engagement in community health assessment and community health improvement planning ✓ Collaborate with worker centers and community organizations to document health, living and working conditions among low-wage and vulnerable populations ✓ Provide resources (e.g., staff time, data) to organizing groups working on policy campaigns to make the connection between health and issues they care about	Read up on community organizing and public health
d. Develop fact sheets and asset maps	✓ Develop and distribute data and fact sheets on specific social determinants of health (e.g. how housing, jobs, education, or transportation impact health) to aid community advocacy efforts and policy goals ✓ Develop an asset map of existing resources in communities to highlight their resiliency and things people love, and to change the narrative about communities	Don't reinvent the wheel — build on existing resources to make yours locally relevant

Actions to Champion Transformative Change to Advance Health Equity

Action	Action Description	Tip
a. Build leadership and organizing skills	✓ Commit to and pursue leadership development and capacity-building opportunities for agency leaders and staff, particularly around engaging in upstream policy work, working with communities, and explicitly organizing around health equity ✓ Support staff who want to move more quickly to make their programs more equitable while also developing broader organizational change activities that set the tone around your commitment to equity	Encourage staff to take risks and speak out against inequities
b. Engage your department's leadership	✓ Train executive staff in health equity early on to build buy-in from leadership and begin incorporating more explicit actions to advance equity in staff workplans and activities ✓ Explore opportunities to incorporate health equity principles and metrics into departmental and cross-sector visioning — for example, as an Accountable Health Community or in Community Health Assessments ✓ Invite department leadership to speak at health equity workshops, trainings, and presentations	Emphasize how leaders can seize this opportunity to advance equity
c. Change the language you are using	✓ Educate yourself and others about the importance of framing and communications ✓ Build up your comfort and capacity to talk about equity, oppression, and power ✓ Develop boilerplate language for reports and factsheets about how social determinants of health, particularly structural racism and history, create and are impacted by inequities in health ✓ Expand framing of what creates health from a disease/ outcome focus to include "what's needed to be healthy"	Connect personal stories to the policy and social change needed to improve health for all
d. Speak up and use your authority	✓ Leverage your authority as a health professional to speak out about racism and other root causes of health inequities in public meetings, op-eds, media interviews, and other public forums ✓ Normalize that this kind of commentary and analysis is okay for staff within your department	Have equity talking points ready and always connect back to health
e. Connect with others	✓ Talk to others about starting an informal health equity group of health professionals inside or outside their professional spheres ✓ Connect to national networks advancing equity, such as GARE, Public Health Awakened, CityMatCH, and others to tap into their resources and knowledge ✓ Make time for fun and celebrating victories together	Emphasize the importance of working collectively with others – we can't do this alone