

HealthEquityGuide.org

A Human Impact Partners Project



Strategic Practices and Actions to Advance Health Equity in Local Health Departments

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How to Use this Document

We developed this document to list the Health Equity Guide Strategic Practices and their related actions all in one place, and to help you in group discussions or to track progress.

For references used to develop these strategic practices and actions, and additional information about how the website was developed, please visit: <https://healthequityguide.org/about/>

Tips to 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.

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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.

Building Internal Infrastructure to Advance Health Equity

1. Mobilize Data, Research, and Evaluation
2. Build Organizational Capacity
3. Change Internal Practices and Procedures
4. Prioritize Upstream Policy Change
5. Allocate Resources



Strategic Practice #1: Mobilize Data, Research, and Evaluation

Mobilize data, research, and evaluation to make the case for, assess, and inform interventions for health equity



One asset public health departments can bring to equity movements is their data, research, and evaluation capacities. Data helps us understand, investigate, and spread awareness about the causes of inequities, and helps point to social and environmental interventions to improve health.

There are many different ways to utilize data, including:

- Identifying priorities to hold the department and other agencies accountable to advancing health equity
- Developing reports that highlight health inequities across programs and issue areas; partnering with other government agencies to identify, analyze, and report data about the social determinants of health
- Providing community-level data and profiles that show opportunities and challenges; collecting and reporting data disaggregated by race, ethnicity, income, gender, neighborhood, etc.
- Working with community members to identify indicators of interest and progress towards their goals
- Making data available to communities so they can use it in their own efforts to advance equity
- Using qualitative methods and community-based participatory research to bring quantitative data to life, as well as to lift community voices and strengthen community relationships

Actions to Mobilize Data, Research and Evaluation:

- ✓ Regularly collect, analyze, and report demographic and socio-economic characteristics to profile population trends and better understand who is affected by health inequities.
- ✓ Regularly collect, analyze, and report data on the social determinants of health (e.g. as indicators, in the CHA/CHIP, in policy development/evaluation).
- ✓ Use data about inequities to identify department priorities.
- ✓ Use community-based participatory research and/or qualitative methods (surveys, interviews, focus groups) to ground-truth and bring to life quantitative data and to lift community voice.
- ✓ Incorporate demographic characteristics and health equity metrics into ongoing department data collection and analysis efforts (e.g. disease surveillance, performance evaluation/QI, program evaluations, satisfaction surveys).
- ✓ Work with other government agencies and partners to: 1) identify, analyze, and report data about the social determinants of health and 2) apply parallel approaches to data collection, analysis, and reporting in a way that is accessible to the public.
- ✓ Enable ongoing capacity building for health department staff to improve and advance their health equity data analysis, research, and evaluation skills.

Strategic Practices and Actions to Advance Health Equity in Local Health Departments

- ✓ Actively engage community members in selecting focus areas and project-specific and department-wide indicators, data, and priority measures to hold agencies accountable for advancing health equity.
- ✓ Respond proactively to community requests for data on issues that impact their lives, (e.g. police shootings, deportations, evictions, and incarceration). Make data available to communities so they can use it in their own efforts to advance equity.
- ✓ Use maps and other compelling graphics, short reports/briefs, and fact sheets to disseminate data.
- ✓ Acknowledge missing data, biases, and limitations of the data and our LHDs.
- ✓ Translate research and data into different languages.
- ✓ Highlight the most striking inequalities in data and publications — and the reasons for these inequalities — through clear, consistent, and widespread messages to decision-makers, affected communities, partners, and the general public.

Strategic Practice #2: Build Organizational Capacity

Build understanding and capacity to advance equity across the department and workforce



Health department staff across the organization must develop their knowledge and capacity to advance health equity practice. Leadership should encourage a culture of continuous learning and experimentation.

Health departments must therefore implement organizational development strategies that build theoretical understanding of equity, oppression, and power. They must also impart practical skills to apply this understanding across all policies, programs, practices, and interventions. These strategies can include agency-wide trainings, intra-departmental workgroups, peer-learning and coaching sessions, and other opportunities to reflect and discuss equity-related content. Embarking on these strategies requires strong facilitation skills to ensure discussions are inclusive, respectful of different staff perspectives, and allow staff to share their lived experiences of inequities.

Actions to Build Organizational Capacity:

- ✓ Have an ongoing process of education, structured dialogue, and organizational development that engages all department staff to:
 1. Explain the evidence around health inequities and its sources
 2. Explore the root causes of health inequities — oppression & power — and how to address them
 3. Discuss the values and needs of the community
 4. Build core competencies and capacities of staff to successfully achieve health equity
- ✓ Consider using agency-wide trainings, intra-departmental workgroups, peer learning sessions, coaching, and other approaches that create space to reflect and discuss equity-related content
- ✓ Build capacity around topics that normalize and operationalize health equity, such as:
- ✓ Attending undoing racism or anti-racism training
- ✓ Implementing policies, practices, and tools that explicitly address racial equity
- ✓ Advancing an approach to include health equity in all policies
- ✓ Develop organizational infrastructure to support change — for example, establishing “change teams” in every department to support and lead equity work and assigning health equity staff to embed equity throughout the entire organization to transform organizational practice
- ✓ Build capacity at all levels of the organization to develop strong relationships with communities experiencing inequities and to identify and implement community solutions to end health inequities
- ✓ Commit to developing a professional workforce that reflects the demographics of the populations served and the communities facing health inequities
- ✓ Establish a hiring process that vets candidates for their sensitivities to and understanding of root causes of health inequities, including willingness to learn, cultural humility, and listening skills

Strategic Practice #3: Change Internal Practices and Processes

Change internal practices and align internal processes to advance equity



Health departments must align a wide range of internal policies and practices across their agencies in order to truly advance health equity — and importantly, to remove barriers to advancing equity. Difficult work must be done to reveal how current policies and practices support or impede equity.

Strategies vary, but may include:

- Increasing workforce diversity by changing hiring, retention, promotion, and training practices
- Building the cultural competence and humility of staff — especially those engaged in service delivery
- Focusing on accreditation, performance management, and quality improvement
- Revising administrative processes, including contracting and RFPs, to support health equity goals
- Aligning funding streams to make the biggest impact on health equity
- Assessing programs and activities according to health equity goals and metrics

Actions to Change Internal Practices and Processes:

- ✓ Use mission, vision, and values statements to communicate the priority of advancing health equity, as well as the health department's role in addressing health equity
- ✓ Develop a strategic plan that outlines the health department's intentions to change and align internal practices and processes to advance equity
- ✓ Include health equity language and apply a health and racial equity approach to organizational processes and procedures, including:
 - Contracts/RFPs and contract reviewing
 - Grant making and grant reviewing
 - Hiring and human resources
 - Workforce development
 - Data acquisition and analysis
 - Budgeting and resource allocation
 - Other key organizational processes and procedures
- ✓ Create recruitment, retention, promotion, and training policies to ensure that the professional workforce — including sub-contractors — reflects the demographics of the populations served
- ✓ Use performance management and quality improvement principles, such as rapid-cycle improvement, to continuously improve policies, processes, and programs that advance health equity
- ✓ Examine public and organizational policies, rules, and regulations that facilitate or inhibit working upstream and ensure that resources are not reinforcing cultural bias, barriers, and inequities

Strategic Practice #4: Prioritize Upstream Policy Change

Prioritize improving the social determinants of health through upstream policy change



By focusing on individual behaviors, health departments direct enormous resources to respond to the symptoms of inequity, never fully eliminating the roots of inequity. Focusing on upstream policy change should be at the heart of a health department's work to advance health equity, at the local, state and federal level, and with diverse partners.

These policy changes would require health departments to examine a wide range of social determinants of health that are traditionally outside their culture, narrative, and practice — from housing to criminal justice to education.

Health departments can achieve policy change using a number of tactics, including:

- Building awareness of the connection between social issues and health with different audiences
- Conducting research on this connection and reporting research publicly
- Undertaking direct and indirect advocacy in decision-making contexts
- Strengthening staff capacity to identify and focus on upstream factors across the agency's programs

The key to success is partnering with local communities and directing policy-change resources to support their priorities. Health departments can leverage existing service providers (e.g. home visiting nurses, lead inspectors, clinic providers) to collect data and document conditions to inform and influence policy.

Actions to Prioritize Upstream Policy Change:

- ✓ Build awareness of the connection between the social determinants and health with different audiences, including health department staff, healthcare institutions, government agencies, elected officials, and community stakeholders
- ✓ Advance a narrative that says: 1) health is more than health care, and 2) to improve health, we must focus on community conditions that lead to health
- ✓ Create and champion a legislative agenda that focuses on upstream social determinants, and undertake direct and/or indirect advocacy in decision-making contexts to advance targeted policies
- ✓ Develop relationships and multi-sectoral collaborations with city/county/state agencies of labor, transportation, education, corrections, economic development, housing, and public safety to influence their decision making in ways that promote health equity
- ✓ Incorporate goals, language, and data about health equity and the social and economic conditions necessary for health into city/county/state's plans, budgets, assessments, and other strategic documents
- ✓ Develop or adopt policies, practices, and tools that explicitly address health and racial equity

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- ✓ Lead or participate in health impact assessments or the application of equity impact tools to analyze the health and equity impacts of proposed policies, programs, and plans on community health. Recommend mitigations to address negative impacts and promote health and equity
- ✓ Conduct and disseminate research that directly links health outcomes to environmental, social, and economic factors in specific communities, neighborhoods, or within other groups
- ✓ Strengthen staff capacity and encourage direct service staff to explore the underlying causes of inequities and to identify and advocate for policy, systems, and environmental changes that advance equity
- ✓ Understand the priorities of local communities, partner with them, and direct policy change resources to support their priorities

Strategic Practice #5: Allocate Resources



Allocate resources to advance equity

Health departments must institutionally commit to advancing health equity as a primary focus/mission of their organization. This commitment must be fostered and supported across all parts of the agency with an expectation that every office and/or bureau strategically direct staff resources to implement policies and practices that advance equity.

Internal planning initiatives must integrate an equity perspective. Budgeting priorities and decisions are an important opportunity to align resources across multiple funding streams to advance equity, both within the health department and across government. General funds, categorical funding, and grant funding can all be leveraged creatively to more optimally advance health equity work.

Actions to Allocate Resources:

- ✓ Dedicate funding to health equity staff positions responsible for embedding equity throughout the entire organization and transforming organizational practice
- ✓ Track and realign resource allocation to ensure that departments direct resources to engage and impact those with greatest need in order to advance health equity
- ✓ Track and realign resource allocation to ensure that departments direct resources to target upstream policy, systems, and environmental interventions that address health equity
- ✓ Apply participatory budget tools and/or processes to health department programs and city/county/state decision-making to enable community decision-making on where funding should be allocated
- ✓ Leverage and integrate funding streams (e.g., general funds, categorical funding, and grant funding) to advance health equity, including partnerships with communities and upstream policy, systems, and environmental change
- ✓ Align payment methods, quality improvement, and fiscal incentives with performance on health equity measures
- ✓ Collaborate with foundations, private donors, and others to direct resources toward community organizations addressing the social determinants of health and health inequities
- ✓ Create and/or support a fund for staff and/or community innovation to address health inequities
- ✓ Seek grants to support initial health equity capacity building with a clear plan of how to institutionalize processes, plans, and activities into the long-term department budget

Work Across Government to Advance Health Equity

6. Build Government Alliances
7. Develop a Shared Analysis
8. Broaden Regulatory Scope



Strategic Practice #6: Build Government Alliances

Build alliances with other government agencies to advance equity



Many government agencies are not trained or don't see the need to think about the social determinants of health in their policy-making, which range from housing to transportation to economic development and police practices. Cross-sector agency collaborations can help other agencies to cultivate greater ownership and responsibility on how their actions can benefit or burden community health. Health departments can also become allies to agencies that are considering policy changes that may be contested by various stakeholders.

Health departments must invest staff resources in developing these long-term relationships, which are fundamental to advancing health-equity policy change. Approaches that place equity at the center of governance — for example, Health in All Policies — are particularly useful in initiating and fostering these collaborations.

Actions to Build Government Alliances:

- ✓ Build awareness of the connection between the social determinants and health with government agencies, elected officials, and community stakeholders. Advance a narrative that says: 1) health is more than health care, and 2) to improve health, we must focus on community conditions that lead to health
- ✓ Develop working relationships and multi-sectoral collaborations with city/county/state agencies of labor, transportation, education, corrections, economic development, housing, and public safety to influence their decision making in ways that promote health equity. Seek inclusion in related agencies' policy discussions and decision making
- ✓ Compare health department data and analysis with other agencies' corresponding data and analysis. Use the data to develop a shared understanding of community conditions that create health
- ✓ In collaboration with other agencies, conduct equity analyses (e.g., health impact assessments, equity impact analyses, or research studies) to examine the impacts of proposed policies, projects, and plans on health equity
- ✓ Advance a health equity in all policies approach by: 1) building relationships with and engaging agency counterparts to add health considerations in policy development, and 2) engaging in dialogue with residents, governing bodies, and elected officials regarding governmental policies responsible for health inequities
- ✓ Incorporate goals, language, and data about health equity and the social and economic conditions necessary for health into city/county/state's plans, budgets, assessments, and other strategic documents

Strategic Practice #7: Develop a Shared Analysis



Develop a shared analysis with other agencies about government's role in creating health equity

The U.S. government has always played a role in both creating and mitigating health inequities. Policies have contributed to the political, social, and economic marginalization of people of color, immigrants, Native Americans, LGBTQ people, people with disabilities, women, and others. These policies include: American's roots in colonialism and slavery; discriminatory laws around education, housing, transportation, and employment; and lack of protections for many disadvantaged groups.

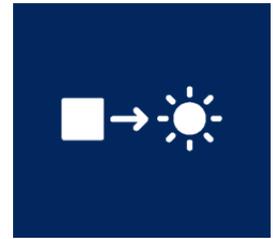
It is important to create time and space for government staff to co-learn and reflect on this history, and to develop a shared analysis around the historical role of government in perpetuating "othering" and exclusion. The goal of this reflection is to help staff understand the birth of our current systems and structures, and our roles in changing them, rather than to point blame or assign guilt. Undertaking such an analysis will help agencies understand how communities perceive and distrust them, as well as consider actions that break from that historical context.

Actions to Develop a Shared Analysis:

- ✓ Work with agencies to advance a shared understanding of: 1) the historical role of government laws, policies, and practices that created and maintained inequities — particularly around race, 2) a definition of equity and inequity, 3) the difference between explicit and implicit bias, 4) the difference between individual, institutional, and structural racism, and 5) government's role in repairing these harms
- ✓ Work with agencies to normalize conversations about race, racism, health inequities, power, and the social determinants of health
- ✓ Develop staff capacity to ask critical questions across government about the development of policies, practices, and investments — and how these might perpetuate or alleviate health inequities
- ✓ With government partners, use a health equity and/or social determinants framework to assess state and local policies that affect the social and economic factors contributing to health inequities
- ✓ Request data collection and analysis from other government agencies that aligns with health department data collection and analysis methods so that data are comparable across sector. Use the data to develop a shared understanding of community conditions that create health

Strategic Practice #8: Broaden Regulatory Scope

Broaden the administrative and regulatory scope of public health and other agency practices to advance health equity



Local health departments have regulatory, administrative, and enforcement oversight over many issues. In some cases, the oversight authority exists (e.g., health analyses in environmental impact review), but the powers are unused or are interpreted in a very limited manner.

Departments can leverage their untapped powers by reading and interpreting public health law to identify ways to take action as a health agency, and then seeking legal counsel to ensure the interpretation is defensible. In many other cases, other agencies are responsible for social determinants policy — like housing, transportation, or planning — even though policies, programs, and practices in these sectors affect health and equity.

Aside from building alliances with other government agencies, local health departments should expand their regulatory and enforcement power to ensure communities have safer living and working conditions. For example, departments may be able to protect communities who face health risks from unscrupulous employers, landlords, business owners, and others.

Actions to Broaden Regulatory Scope:

- ✓ Identify, develop, and implement approaches and policies to expand the department’s statutory authority around health, particularly in ways that expand responsibility around social determinants
- ✓ Support the revision of statutes, regulations, and codes that govern local health departments to ensure non-discrimination in the distribution of public health benefits and interventions
- ✓ Influence other agencies’ policies and decisions that affect the social and economic conditions required for health. Promote public investments in community infrastructure that sustain and improve community health and decrease inequities
- ✓ Incorporate goals, language, and data about health equity and the social and economic conditions necessary for health into city/county/state’s plans, budgets, assessments, and other strategic documents

Foster Community Partnerships to Advance Health Equity

- 9. Share Power with Communities
- 10. Build Community Alliances
- 11. Engage in Movements



Strategic Practice #9: Share Power with Communities

Build strategic community relationships, share power and decision making, and spark meaningful participation



Strong, strategic, long-term, and trusting relationships with community partners are vital to advancing health equity and transforming public health practices. These relationships must recognize each other's strengths, be rooted in shared values and interests, share decision making, and allow for authentic participation by those facing inequities.

Rather than simply seeking feedback or hosting one-way conversations, health departments must intentionally listen to and learn from communities, and partner with communities in ways that build their capacity and power to gain greater control over the factors that affect their lives. Health departments should follow best practices, which include:

- Remaining open to learning about community priorities
- Allowing time and space to get to know one another
- Identifying strategic opportunities for communities to contribute their expertise and knowledge
- Sharing resources to develop skills and capacity to partner with the health department
- Most importantly, departments must demonstrate a willingness to be guided by communities' needs, interests, and voices, which will determine departments' policy and program priorities.

Actions to Share Power with Communities:

- ✓ Partner with communities experiencing inequities in ways that intentionally share power and decision making. Identify strategic opportunities and avenues for communities to contribute their expertise and knowledge. Co-develop, adopt, and promote a shared agenda, narrative, and resources to advance health equity
- ✓ Design more inclusive decision-making processes to actively reduce the marginalization of specific racial and socioeconomic groups. Allocate time, funds, and capacity building to facilitate the meaningful participation of communities experiencing health inequities in department decision making
- ✓ Create a culture of respectful co-learning, evaluation, reflection, and transparency about department and community needs/priorities to build trust between department and community partners
- ✓ Allow time and space to connect. Routinely attend meetings and events organized by community and social justice organizations and show support by staying informed of their priorities
- ✓ Train and prepare staff to respectfully and thoughtfully engage with communities experiencing health inequities
- ✓ Highlight and sustain community partnerships that have led to changes in department policies, processes, and practices
- ✓ Use data, advocacy, and other expertise to support community-led social justice efforts that would improve equity

Strategic Practice #10: Build Community Alliances

Build alliances with community partners to protect against risk and build community power



Health departments play a convening role that can be used to advance health equity. Community partners and the health department can develop alliances or networks that collectively and powerfully advance equity by increasing awareness, advocating for policy and systems change, and ensuring accountability.

These formal or informal alliances — led by the department or by the community — can protect the health department from the political risk or pushback invariably associated with advancing equity. The department can create a “base” of community support that can advocate on its behalf to elected officials or other leaders who are questioning the department’s work. Additionally, these alliances showcase a wide demand and interest from the public, helping the health department to expand the boundaries of its work beyond traditional public health activities.

Actions to Build Community Alliances:

- ✓ Leverage health department resources, power, and data to protect communities against risk (e.g. from deportation, discrimination, environmental injustices, poor working conditions) and build community power through capacity building, leadership development, and resource allocation
- ✓ Identify, support, and work collaboratively with the leadership of grassroots and civic organizations whose activities and campaigns advance health equity
- ✓ Ask communities to identify health indicators they want to target and the measures of progress that will be meaningful to them in achieving health equity
- ✓ Include voices of the people experiencing health inequities in all stages of program and policy development and create meaningful opportunities for community engagement and evaluation
- ✓ Enhance residents’ capacity to conduct and analyze their own research, identify levers of power, develop policy strategies, and evaluate their impact
- ✓ Practice transparency with communities around agency needs and priorities, and invest resources to build strong and trusting relationships with community partners
- ✓ Create a “base” of community support that can advocate on the health department’s behalf when elected officials or other leaders question the department’s work

Strategic Practice #11: Engage in Movements

Engage strategically in social justice campaigns and movements to advance equity



Winning policy changes that improve social determinants is inherently tied to advancing health equity. Therefore, health departments must strategically support social justice campaigns and movements that advance equity – such as efforts to raise the minimum wage, reform the criminal justice system, and protect communities from displacement — by providing research, advocacy, and capacity building.

Community partners may initiate and lead these campaigns, rather than the health department or other government agencies, and the campaigns/movements may or may not explicitly focus on advancing health equity. Health departments can offer a range of support to community partners, including providing data and conducting research, as well as advocating in support of community partners' interests using the health department's standing as experts.

Actions to Engage in Movements:

- ✓ Identify, support, and work collaboratively with the leadership of grassroots and civic organizations whose activities and campaigns advance health equity
- ✓ Create and champion a legislative agenda that focuses on upstream social determinants, and undertake direct and/or indirect advocacy in decision-making contexts to advance targeted policies
- ✓ Work with communities experiencing inequities to co-develop, adopt, and promote a shared agenda and narrative to advance health equity
- ✓ Develop, influence, and/or implement policies to improve social and economic conditions, especially for communities experiencing health inequities
- ✓ Publish social justice-related data and research that community partners are prioritizing and using to organize — particularly data that align with the department's priorities
- ✓ Present at legislative hearings, press conferences, community events, and other public spaces about how health and equity are affected by the social justice issues that mobilize community partners

Champion Transformative Change to Advance Health Equity

12. Confront the Root Causes
13. Develop Leadership and Support Innovation
14. Change the Conversation
15. Build a Health Equity Movement



Strategic Practice #12: Confront the Root Causes

Confront power imbalances and the racial and other forms of oppression used to maintain those imbalances



Health inequities are typically the result of inequities in the social determinants of health. These inequities can be traced to social and political injustices — such as the unequal distribution of power and various forms of oppression used to maintain those power imbalances.

Advancing health equity means challenging these power imbalances and forms of oppression, including racism, sexism, classism, homophobia, ableism, and xenophobia, in all aspects of our work — both internally in our departmental policies and practices, and externally in how we work with communities and other government agencies. Embarking on this work acknowledges the very real context in which people and communities of color and low-income people and communities — who have borne the brunt of these inequities — are able to more meaningfully and authentically partner with health departments to advance health equity.

Actions to Confront the Root Causes:

- ✓ Stand up for and speak out about racism, class exploitation, gender inequality, and power imbalances, as well as the effects of social exclusion to staff, other agencies, elected officials, the public, and the media
- ✓ Apply knowledge and training around bias and structural racism in program and policy work
- ✓ Engage in meaningful ways with communities experiencing inequities in order to develop a shared agenda to advance health equity
- ✓ Promote policies and practices to explicitly assess and address power imbalances, racial equity, and the disproportionate impacts of oppression in your organization's work
- ✓ Influence, develop, and/or implement policies to improve social and economic conditions in your jurisdiction, especially for populations of color and others experiencing health inequities
- ✓ Apply participatory budget tools and/or processes to health department programs and city/county/state decision making to enable community decision-making on where funding should be allocated
- ✓ Use tools such as data collection, reports, presentations, assessment, and program evaluation to identify health inequities and demonstrate how they are connected to policy, system, and environmental conditions and opportunities
- ✓ Develop and utilize frameworks or theories of change that acknowledge and address the role of power on social, racial, and health inequities

Strategic Practice #13: Develop Leadership and Support Innovation

Develop leadership, support innovation, and reward strategic risk taking to advance equity



In conservative and progressive places alike, advancing health equity is difficult, as people benefitting from the status quo often hold power and do not support changes that advance equity. Health departments need leadership — at the top and throughout the organization — willing to challenge this status quo, and to talk and act more explicitly in areas that may be perceived as “controversial.”

Departments must be intentional in developing the leadership to advance health equity, support innovation at all staff levels, and reward strategic risk taking. Health departments must also encourage a culture of learning and experimentation that is more responsive to social and political contexts. Taking these steps creates the conditions for health department staff to think and work in a way that takes health equity to a deeper and more meaningful level.

Actions to Develop Leadership and Support Innovation:

- ✓ Stand up for and speak out about racism, class exploitation, gender inequality, and power imbalances, as well as the effects of social exclusion to staff, other agencies, elected officials, the public, and the media
- ✓ Support the development of leaders at all levels of the organization — for example, through professional development, allocating staff resources to pilot projects, rewarding health equity work, and reducing hierarchy
- ✓ Take actions that are strategic yet initially risky to support a culture of learning, innovation, continuous improvement, and risk taking
- ✓ Develop a practice of asking questions at all levels and points in the process. Questions include: Who benefits from the effort or program? What is the health impact? Who will experience the health impacts? What and whose values, beliefs, and assumptions are respected? What is the anticipated outcome (noting outcome is different than intent)? Is there need for further study?
- ✓ Build deep and trusting relationships with community organizing groups who can challenge outside assertions that your work is too political or sensitive
- ✓ Build and work with strategic alliances, such as regional public health agency collaboratives, that are better poised to innovate and take strategic risks around controversial policy issues
- ✓ Be vocal with decision makers and other government agencies when policy proposals might exacerbate inequities, even when doing so is not the easy thing to do
- ✓ Hold intentional discussions about strategy and tactics to determine which risks are worth taking
- ✓ Proactively develop relationships across sectors, with sister agencies, and with elected officials and their offices, to assist in understanding the political landscape and establishing rapport and credibility

Strategic Practice #14: Change the Conversation

Change the conversation about what creates health equity within public health, across government, and in communities



Narratives are the values-based stories we tell about how and why the world works as it does, and they frame our response to the problems we see. Health departments must actively work within their departments and with community and government partners to change an entrenched narrative — around risk factors, behavior change, and the biomedical model — that impedes progress on health equity.

A new narrative would expand the understanding of what creates health — the social determinants and equity — and improves how we articulate our vision of social and health equity and a clear path forward that can inspire and encourage others to join us. Making a narrative shift requires understanding historical and political contexts, and the role of policy, systems, and environmental change in addressing or exacerbating inequities. It also includes expanding the definition of what public health can — and must — do.

Departments must harness the power of popular culture at one end and developing communications plans and messages at the other — all to clearly and consistently express and translate the concepts of health equity, target upstream policy change, and join social justice movements.

Actions to Change the Conversation:

- ✓ Use mission, vision, and values statements to communicate the priority of advancing health equity, as well as the health department's role in addressing health equity
- ✓ Work with communities experiencing inequities and others to develop, use, and promote a shared narrative around health that focuses on the social determinants of health, power, and oppression rather than individual responsibility and a biomedical model. Make sure to talk about the role of policy, systems, and environmental change in addressing inequities
- ✓ Develop an agency-wide communication plan with messages about what creates health and equity
- ✓ Leverage social media, agency-wide communications and newsletters, earned media, and public events to raise awareness of the conditions that create health and inequities
- ✓ Normalize conversations about health equity in meetings, presentations, and other forums by explicitly including equity data and terms that include: social justice, racism, oppression, and power
- ✓ Leverage data to: 1) change the narrative of what creates health, 2) inform and inspire policy change, and 3) support partnerships and engagement
- ✓ Use tools such as data collection, reports, presentations, assessment, and program evaluation to identify health inequities and demonstrate how they are connected to policy, system, and environmental conditions and opportunities
- ✓ When developing agency publications, frame messaging in a way that:
 - Connects individual health outcomes to the social issues and inequities that drive those outcomes
 - Presents a solution to the problem, e.g., makes a practical policy appeal
 - Assigns primary responsibility for who can fix the problem
 - Uses stories and images to humanize the impacts
 - Is tailored to various audiences, e.g. communities experiencing inequities and decision makers

Strategic Practice #15: Build a Health Equity Movement

Join with others in public health to build a health equity movement



Nationwide, health departments are taking risks to better integrate health equity, and there is value in aligning with each other to learn from successes and challenges. Referring to colleagues' work and citing concrete examples can help validate equity work and build capacity.

Normalizing and operationalizing health equity work can also help mitigate the risk inherent in engaging in upstream policy work, sharing decision making with communities, and talking about power and oppression. Establishing intentional alliances and networks with others engaged in advancing justice and equity also solidifies a position that reflects progressive health equity practice within local health departments.

We must develop a common voice in the public health community that stands for specific values, principles, strategies, and tactics. This voice and our collective actions will help us harness the power in public health to make positive change.

Actions to Build a Health Equity Movement:

- ✓ Collaborate with local, regional, state, and national partners from public health and social justice communities to advance health equity, and to help solidify a movement for progressive health equity practice
- ✓ Promote the work of other health departments to make the case for investing in health equity work
- ✓ Work with community organizers to train health department staff on the principles and practices of community organizing
- ✓ Work with community organizers to include a message of health equity in their organizing efforts
- ✓ Support increasing the voice and influence of communities impacted by health inequities in policy change
- ✓ Hold provider networks and other public health system partners accountable for advancing health equity
- ✓ Listen and learn from broader social movements to better understand their issues, processes, and narratives, and how they build power and motivate their base