Leveraging Policy Change to Address Health Disparities
Webinar Summary and Call to Action

PARTNERS for **ADVANCING HEALTH EQUITY**

Webinar Focus

The Partners for Advancing Health Equity Collaborative hosted the webinar, *Leveraging Policy Change to Address Health Disparities* on March 26, 2025. Panelists engaged in discussions about ways to participate in civic engagement and political advocacy for health policy change, highlighting the importance of building community-centered, cross-sector movements. This report provides a synthesis of key takeaways, solutions, and action steps identified from the webinar.

Webinar Voices

> Caryn Bell, Associate Director, P4HE, Celia Scott Weatherhead School of Public Health & Tropical Medicine, Tulane University

> Jennifer Ito, Research Director, USC Equity Research Institute

> Mayra E. Alvarez, President, The Children's Partnership

Key Resources

- Connecticut Health Advocacy Toolbox
- Coalition for Justice and Equality Across Movements
- Engaging Patients in Design, Delivery, and Evaluation of Health Services

Your Voice

P4HE values your collaboration. If there is a resource on this topic that you would like to share with us, provide it here.

Key Takeaways

Civic engagement and political advocacy are crucial for creating and changing policies to amplify community voices and impact health. During this webinar, speakers outlined ***how*** we can promote and participate in civic engagement and political advocacy to affect health policy during this critical time. Connecting and organizing in communities, forming cross-sector coalitions, and investing in effective policy implementation can contribute to addressing health disparities and improving health for all.

Webinar attendees highlighted specific actions that the health equity community should take to drive policy change, including **prioritizing and elevating community voices in decision-making, organizing and lobbying**, **advocating for quality healthcare**, **uplifting and partnering with other movements fighting for change**, and **training health profession students in advocacy**. Attendees also listed the tools and resources that would help facilitate policy change, such as **community engagement, relationship-building with communities and other key partners**, **creating coalitions**, **pursuing litigation**, **utilizing equity-focused research and data tools**, **leveraging social media**, and **sharing stories**.

Call To Action

"We have to look to the power of movement, the power of coalitions, the power of coming together in unity and solidarity to demand better for our communities." Mayra E. Alvarez, President, The Children's Partnership

P4HE's Working Definition of Civic Engagement for Health Equity

Civic engagement for health equity involves collaborative, evidence-based, and non-partisan advocacy from individuals across all sectors and levels of influence. It underscores that everyone, irrespective of their background or position, can participate. This approach aims to address systemic barriers and advance policies that promote equitable health outcomes. It emphasizes bridging divides, fostering systemic change, and centering marginalized communities with lived experience to shape solutions that are grounded in both scientific evidence and community insights.

Want to help us shape future definitions?

The P4HE Collaborative is working to collectively define terms related to health equity in our Interactive Learning Sessions. For registration information and details on how to be a part of the next session, sign up for the Newsletter or visit our Learn page.

Below, we've summarized immediate action steps shared by the panelists and identified by participants to be taken to advance health equity.

Actions for Promoting Civic Engagement and Political Advocacy for Health Equity

› Promote community connections and organizing through civic engagement and political advocacy for health equity.
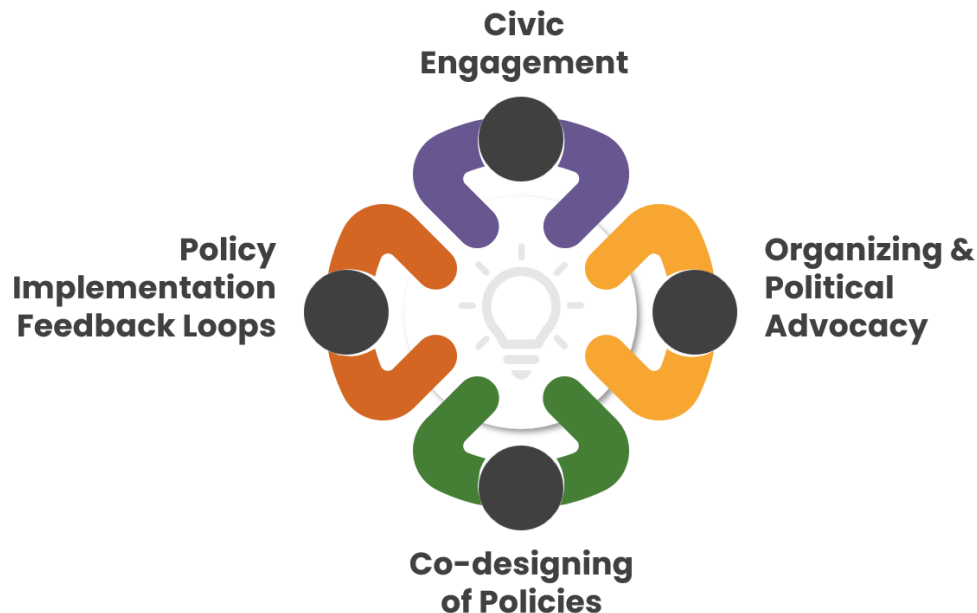
"[We] need to go back to local community and to recognizing the power in connection as community members. The dominant narrative continues to divide us and put forward this notion that we are more different than we are similar. [We] need to push back against that." Mayra E. Alvarez, President, The Children's Partnership

During such a critical time for health, it is important to be reminded of the value of community and connecting with others as motivation to lean on each other and fight for change together. Civic engagement and political advocacy for health policy reform depend on individuals coming together and unifying around common goals for better health outcomes. To start, gather with others in community spaces, both virtual and in person, to get to know one another. Challenge the notions of individualism and the resulting isolation that permeates society and has contributed to decreased civic engagement and increased divisions on various policy issues. In doing so, people can gain a better understanding of each other and shared experiences with inequity by leading such discussions with compassion and empathy, realizing that we are more alike than different. Authentically build relationships with others, even unlikely peers, in order to establish trust and show solidarity in pursuing policy change together. It is then essential for communities to identify the issues that are most pressing and create an agenda for ways to advocate for them through the political process. Grassroots community organizers and advocates can help to increase voter registration and participation in the area, teach people about how policies impact health, offer advocacy training and resources, and endorse policy change that will increase access to resources and quality care, particularly for underserved populations, and therefore, improve health. Not only can civic engagement and political advocacy lead to real change in policies, but the very act of participating and the belief in the power of community and in the ability to enact change also benefits the mental well-being of each individual and the community at large. With support from organizations from various sectors, communities can have their voices heard, step into their own power, and assemble a strong base that, as webinar speaker Jennifer Ito states, "creates the conditions for leaders to have no choice but to align." When members of the community connect over shared experiences, are equipped to uplift their health needs, and take collective action through civic engagement and political advocacy, they can put forth promising, evidence-based policies and influence policymakers to implement such necessary initiatives to advance health equity.

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Policy Change Actions for Communities

Civic Engagement

Organizing & Political Advocacy

Co-designing of Policies

Policy Implementation Feedback Loops

> **Form intersectional, cross-sector coalitions to advance political advocacy for health policy change.**

"It takes an ecosystem of organizations [and] the communities that are most impacted. We can't do it alone. How can we make forward movement in ways that make sense for us as individuals and as organizations and be in greater solidarity, in a united front?" Jennifer Ito, Research Director, USC Equity Research Institute

Impactful policy change requires a collaborative ecosystem of organizations and entities with community at the center. Health disparities spawn from every sector of society, necessitating all sectors to come together to participate in political advocacy to generate solutions for health. Each group, such as health professionals, foundations, researchers, and nonprofit organizations, offer valuable expertise and perspectives to utilize in pursuing policy change. Recognize the mutual benefit of building relationships and trust across sectors as this itself is a step toward progress. Avoid working in silos that divide health equity work and inhibit collective action. Participating in civic engagement and political advocacy will look different

Defining Intersectionality

Intersectionality is a way to understand how different aspects of a person's identity, like race, gender, income, and location, combine to create unique experiences of discrimination and privilege.

across sectors due to the varying positions of each and restrictions that may prevent participation. Through collaborative discussions, determine the roles and responsibilities of each partner to promote civic engagement and to advocate for health policy change. It is important to acknowledge the actions that partners can reasonably contribute, especially in the face of increasing constraints set by the government or funders; to lean into these partners' abilities; and to fill in gaps where needed. When forming cross-sector coalitions, ensure that the collaborative meets communities where they are, serving their immediate needs so that they can contribute to creating a shared agenda and strategies for political advocacy that prioritizes the interests of the community. Communities and grassroots leaders are on the frontlines of fighting for health equity, so coalitions must invest in their organizing efforts through funding and on-the-ground supports. Strengthening advocates' capacity in these ways provides opportunities to cycle individuals out for rest, thereby preventing burnout and ensuring long term sustainability of the movement.

Key Elements of Coalitions for Health Policy Change
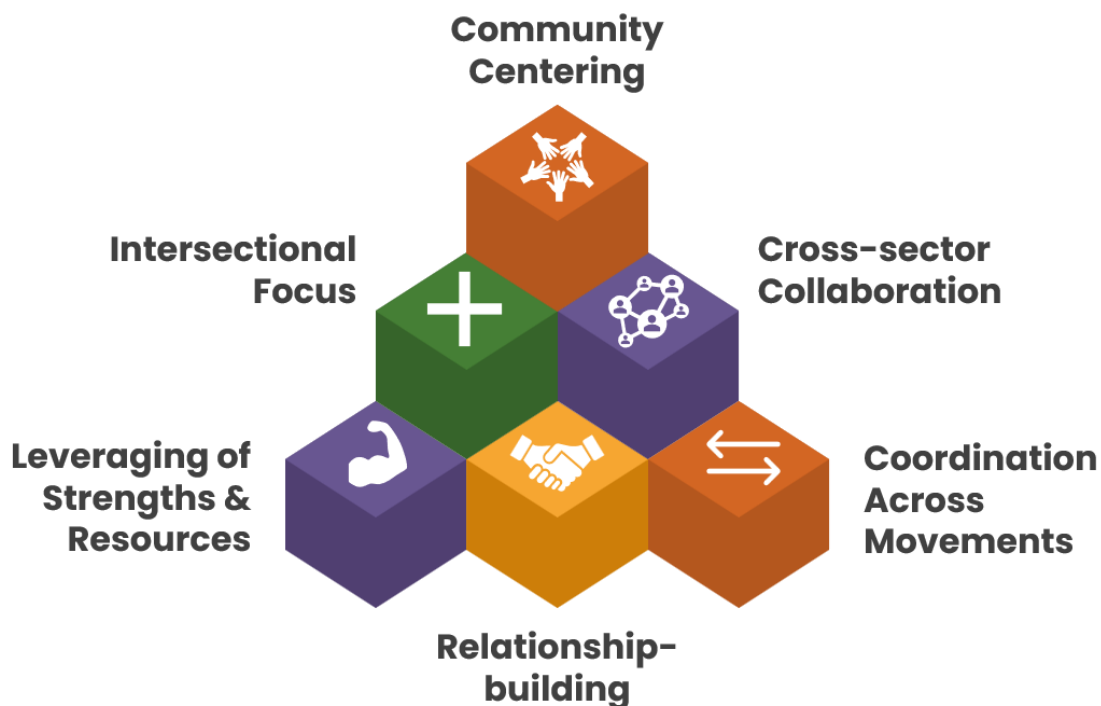
Effective coalition building must also be intersectional and support diverse movements for equity to design and push for policy changes that benefit individuals from various marginalized and underserved racial and ethnic groups, gender identities, income levels, and geographic locations, among other characteristics. Additionally, with the rapidly evolving federal landscape,

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consider how cross-sector collaboratives can impact policy at state and local levels to better serve communities and improve health outcomes. In such critical moment for health, it is now more crucial than ever for organizations across all sectors to realize the power in working together to demand better for communities and to leverage policy change to address health disparities.

› Invest in efforts to understand the implementation of policies through community feedback loops.

Understanding the impacts of the implementation of new policies aimed to reduce health disparities is just as important as the civic engagement and political advocacy that led to the policy creation and change. Sometimes, getting a health issue to be recognized by policymakers is a policy victory in itself. But once recognition of the health issue turns into new legislation enacted, there must be an evaluation of the policy implementation for effectiveness in addressing the very issue it concerns. Even in states and localities that pass seemingly favorable policies to improve health, sometimes the policy goals do not translate to positive outcomes among recipients. To begin to bridge the gap between the intended services offered by the policy and better utilization of such services, ensure that the dissemination of information about the policy is clear and widespread and that the distribution of the offerings is accessible and equitable. Prospective beneficiaries of the policy may not understand how to or feel empowered to seek out the resources provided by the new legislation. To combat this spread awareness of the benefits available and help them feel dignified in receiving them, especially when seeking public benefits.

> **Defining Feedback Loops**
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> Feedback loops are a way to understand how new policies affect health. They involve listening to community members about their experiences and opinions on the services provided by the policy. This helps to make necessary changes to improve the policy's effectiveness.

"Even once you pass the policy, it's the implementation. It's working with government agencies and having the feedback loop with the communities and clients who are supposed to be the beneficiaries. That is a whole other set of measures and metrics." Jennifer Ito, Research Director, USC Equity Research Institute

Once the services and resources provided by the new policy are widely available, attention should be directed towards assessing their effectiveness. This will involve defining quantitative metrics to measure the policy's impact, such as the rates of specific illnesses following service use. Although quantitative measures are useful, they will not capture the full scope of the policy's effects. The involvement and expertise of researchers, health clinicians, government agencies, and policymakers in these conversations can help to optimize data collection strategies. To expand the evidence base, consider and incorporate approaches for gathering qualitative information from communities on

their experiences with the services and the impacts on their health. Listening sessions, focus groups, and appointments focused on whole-person care can provide space for recipients to share their experiences and opinions alongside quantitative metrics. In doing so, these spaces and engagements generate feedback loops to inform and co-design needed changes to the policy to improve service delivery. It is critical to maintain this community feedback loop throughout the lifecycle of the legislation in order to continuously hear recipients' perspectives and needs regarding the policy. Even while advocating for and designing promising policies to advance health equity, there must be proactive consideration for investment in the implementation of the policies once enacted to ensure that the new programs and services offered execute the mission of the cross-sector advocacy efforts to address health disparities and improve health outcomes for all.

Deeper Dive

Mapping an Advocacy Strategy

Pathfinder International, a global nonprofit organization that focuses on expanding reproductive health care and rights, developed an advocacy strategy tool to help coalitions outline advocacy goals and action steps needed to achieve them. The tool provides guiding questions and pages for users to fill out and revise as needed. The tool encompasses several key areas including the coalition's primary advocacy issue, overarching goal, and specific objectives; identification of potential partners and partner contributions; entities targeted for influence in relation to the issue; scheduling of activities; and methodologies and actions to be undertaken. Cross-sector coalitions can utilize this tool to brainstorm and strategize civic engagement and political advocacy activities in pursuit of policy change to advance health equity.

The Importance of Policy Change for Addressing Public Health Problems

Several health subject matter experts reflect on the importance of leveraging policy change to combat national public health issues. In the article, the authors provide a definition of policy and note key elements of public policies set forth by governments at the local, state, and federal level. The article also outlines four essential principles that help advance effective policy change for public health, offering detailed descriptions of each principle, how they bolster policy change, and real-world examples of each principle in action to inform policy development and change. In community-centered, cross-sector coalitions, partners can apply these principles as they participate in political advocacy and to create and change policies to optimize their impact on health.

> **Four Essential Principles for Effective Public Health Policy Change**
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> **1.** Use evidence to inform policy
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> **2.** Consider health equity
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> **3.** Design policy with implementation in mind
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> **4.** Use proactive research–policy translation strategies
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> *Adapted from The Importance of Policy Change for Addressing Public Health Problems*

About P4HE

The P4HE Collaborative harmonizes goals, advances learning, and facilitates collaboration to improve health equity. It is led by the Tulane University Celia Scott Weatherhead School of Public Health and Tropical Medicine and is part of the Tulane Institute for Innovations in Health Equity. Support for this program is provided by ICF. Funding is provided by a grant from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. The views expressed here do not necessarily reflect the views of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation.

Foster
the co-creation and spread of knowledge.

Sharpen
our research tools to focus on solutions, facts and stories.

Disrupt
traditional research approaches.

Harmonize
our voices.

Challenge
the status quo.

Shine
light on practices that are indefensible, irrational and inconsistent.

To learn more about these issues, or Partners for Health Equity's calls to action, a resource library including a full recording of this, and all previous P4HE Webinars, can be found on the P4HE website.

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