

The Politics of Health Equity

Webinar Summary and Call to Action



Webinar Focus

The Partners for Advancing Health Equity Collaborative hosted the webinar, *The Politics of Health Equity* on March 19, 2024. Panelists engaged in discussions about the role of politics to advance health equity, highlighting the importance of political engagement. This report provides a synthesis of key takeaways, solutions, and action steps identified from the webinar.

Webinar Voices

› **Caryn Bell**, Associate Director, P4HE, [Tulane School of Public Health & Tropical Medicine](#)

› **Philip M. Alberti**, Founding Director, AAMC Center for Health Justice; Senior Director, [Health Equity Research and Policy, Association of American Medical Colleges \(AAMC\)](#)

› **Ella Greene-Moton**, President, [American Public Health Association \(APHA\)](#)

› **Anique Forrester**, Chief of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion, Assistant Professor, Department of Psychiatry, [University of Maryland Medical Center](#)

Key Resources

- [Using Evidence to Inform and Change Health Policy](#)
- [Political Engagement for Health Equity](#)
- [Vital Conditions of Health and Well-Being](#)

Your Voice

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

Key Takeaways

Efforts to advance health equity face a critical challenge: politics. Politics involves people in power making decisions on policies that directly impact determinants of health and health outcomes.

Health equity initiatives must confront and navigate political structures, contexts, and barriers that can be opposed to this work. Organizations across sectors can collaboratively participate in the political process and bridge political gaps to push for policies and programs that will improve health outcomes for all.



Webinar participants described how politics impact health equity including **allocating and providing access to resources, services, and opportunities; setting the rules we must play by; controlling funding; and determining who has the power to make decisions.** Many participants reflected that politics impact healthy equity **“in every way.”** Participants also noted the role that politics should play in addressing health disparities by **uplifting communities’ experiences and needs; leveraging the expertise of public health professionals, researchers, and practitioners; expanding access to resources and services; and designing and implementing equitable policies to dismantle systemic barriers.** Participants again also noted that politics can, and should, help address health disparities **“in every way.”**

Call To Action



“Politics [is defined as] a set of activities that are associated with making decisions... Most political decisions cause all kinds of havoc for health for all of us. It’s like a ripple effect.” Ella Greene-Moton, President, American Public Health Association (APHA)

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

> **Understand politics as a decision-making process, who holds the power, and who is left out.**

To participate in the political process to advance health equity, we must first establish a clear definition of politics. [Politics](#) is generally thought to be activities and practices that involve or influence government and policies. To simplify the definition further, politics can be thought of as the activities associated with making decisions. People in politics make decisions every day that shape the underlying structures that impact individuals’ livelihoods, including their health. Politics lead to the creation and implementation of policies that cause disparate access to and quality of resources, services, opportunities, and thereby, perpetuate health inequity. It is important to consider who has the power and influence over such harmful decision-making [and hold them accountable](#).

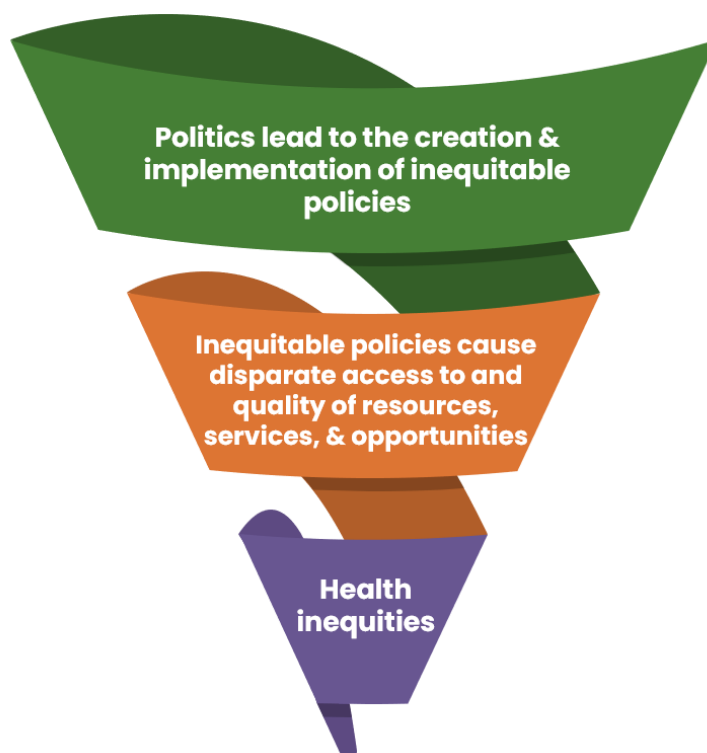


“All policy is health policy. It all contributes to health or detracts from health. Who are the folks that are really having influence over those decisions at all levels? I think that’s where the impact on health and particularly health inequity [is] – when certain voices are intentionally

absent from that decision-making table.” Philip M. Alberti, Founding Director, AAMC Center for Health Justice; Senior Director, Health Equity Research and Policy, Association of American Medical Colleges (AAMC)

To fully understand who is being left out, assess the backgrounds, beliefs, values, and political leaders bias at the local, state, and national levels. Historically and in present day, [a majority of political leaders have been White men](#), a group who first instituted the country’s oppressive political systems and structures and continue to preserve their legacy to this day. This group has always benefited from the oppressive systems that they created, prioritized their political interests, and intentionally excluded others, [particularly marginalized racial, ethnic, and gender groups](#), from being able to wield power.

From Politics to Health Inequity



› **Acknowledge that engaging in politics to improve health outcomes is attainable and impactful.**



"I think about using politics by getting people to realize how not unattainable it is to engage in something you feel passionately about. People think of politics as this big, broad thing, but really a lot of people who get into advocacy work are focused on one or two key

issues." Anique Forrester, Chief of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion, Assistant Professor, Department of Psychiatry, University of Maryland Medical Center

Many individuals [view politics as complex and intimidating](#), discouraging their involvement in the political process and political spaces overall. However, political participation is not as out-of-reach as one may think. Most people are passionate about at least few key societal issues or injustices, including health inequities, that directly impact themselves or communities they care about, and these issues result from policies and decisions made through politics. Channel this passion into efforts aimed to help communities in need. Take responsibility for the contributions you can offer to

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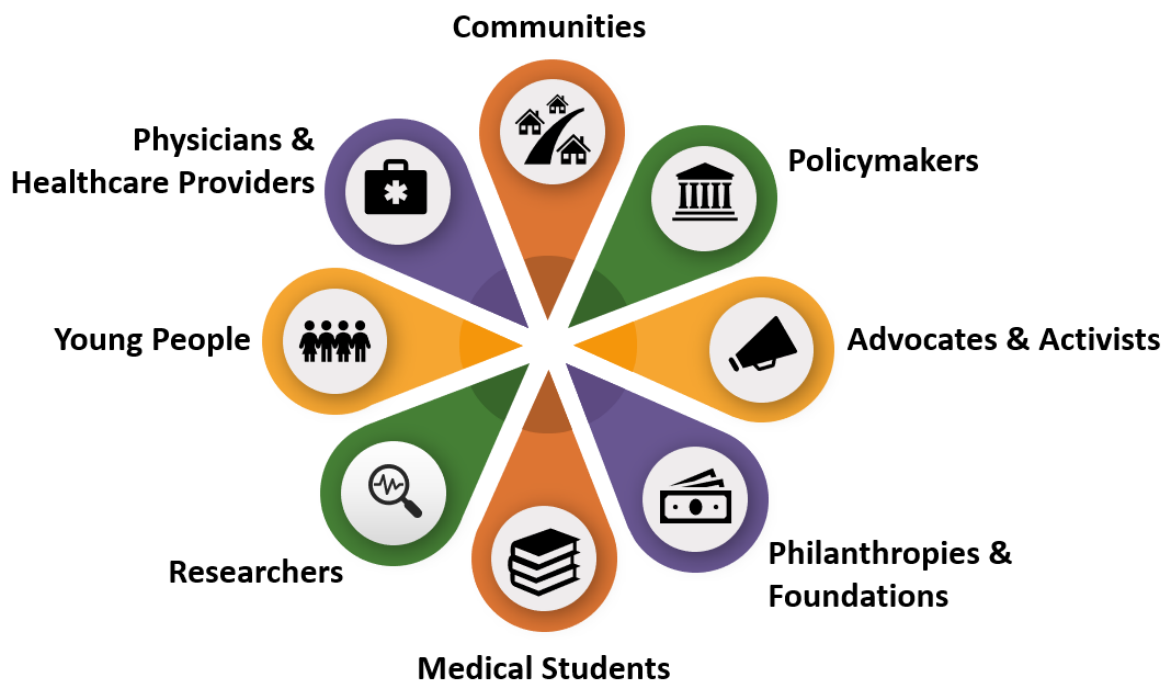
the political process in the pursuit of widespread, systemic changes for health. It is important to realize that individuals or groups will not transform inequity overnight through politics as there is often an uphill battle to truly affect decision-making, given the power imbalances in politics that don't favor people on the ground. Start small by tackling local issues and politics as these are as important but less overwhelming as larger, nationwide problems. Such efforts may include [registering people in the community to vote](#), [facilitating civic participation](#) and community organizing to empower communities to be active in their health and to develop campaigns for shared health priorities, [advocating for local health policy changes](#) and program implementation. Even with smaller political initiatives, partner with people and organizations from various sectors who can offer useful assets to propel the work forward. Acknowledge the positive effects that local political efforts can have on health outcomes within the collaborative's sphere of influence. These partnerships should grow and build upon small wins to work up to larger political undertakings. Use momentum from political victories to continue to overcome the systemic obstacles presented by politics and progress toward health equity. Engaging in politics is more attainable than people think as it can simply start with people demonstrating their passion, drive, and commitment to issues they care deeply about and then joining movements to make change. Cross-sector collaborations, composed of people with a shared enthusiasm and mission to improve health outcomes, can work together to meaningfully contribute to influencing critical decision-making and advancing health equity through the political process.

> Disrupt the status quo by building the power and influence of marginalized communities in politics.

[Support election campaigns](#) of women, people of color, and LGBTQIA+ people. Elevating people of disadvantaged groups to political leadership can increase awareness of their perspectives and lived experiences with health inequities and can help them to push for policies and programs that center the health needs of their communities.

Organizations from various sectors can work together to build the political power of marginalized communities through integrating their health priorities and insights into interventions aimed at improving health outcomes. Utilize the [Seven Vital Conditions of Health and Well-Being framework](#) to guide advocacy and to make political decisions that target key factors and circumstances that are indispensable to leading a prosperous and healthy life. In addition to specific health priorities, advocate for changes to address the social, structural, and political determinants of health that are products of oppressive systems. [Restrictive and discriminatory voting policies](#) and ["Don't Say Gay" laws](#) are examples of such determinants of health that limit communities' political power and impede their access to care and opportunities.

Everyone has Responsibility to Advance Health Equity through Politics



> Get to know your peers and form coalitions to engage in politics for health equity.



"We have to pull others in and make sure that we're making space for folks. Their struggle might not be our struggle, and we have to listen and understand how to deal with their struggles as well." Ella Greene-Moton, President, American Public Health Association (APHA)

Health policies and programs affect everyone eventually. People and organizations from different corners of society can and should be involved in politics to help collectively progress toward health equity. The first step to forming cross-sector coalitions for health equity is to get to know your peers. Ask each other thoughtful questions and actively listen to learn about individuals' experiences, perspectives, and knowledge surrounding their health and the political obstacles in their way. Commit to [authentic engagement](#) in conversations with communities, especially those disproportionately impacted by health disparities, to create an environment built on trust, humility, and sincerity. Ensure that the conversations are [bidirectional](#) in order to facilitate mutual understanding and shared responsibility between partners. In politics, people must find ways to work alongside partners they would not typically connect with otherwise.

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Promoting health equity through politics requires diverse coalitions that can leverage each other's strengths, resources, and influence. Incorporate the skills of researchers who can lead data collection and analysis efforts to better understand important health concerns. Involve physicians, healthcare providers, and public health professionals who are experts in health and can [inform policy development and advocacy](#). [Include medical students](#) in such efforts so they can grasp the value of political participation among doctors to be champions for their patients' health. [Follow the lead of advocates](#) who have experience navigating political processes and spaces. Everyone has a responsibility to collaborate within movements to drive politics toward initiatives that advance health equity.

> **Expand the idea of who can collaborate by working with non-traditional allies.**

Expand collaborative efforts and bring more voices to the table by overcoming the discomfort of [working with non-traditional allies](#) to advance the shared mission. One group often left out of collaborative efforts is youth. Adults often make excuses to exclude young people from political efforts, such as generational or ideological differences or claiming they are too young to understand certain issues. Though, many youth also encounter health inequities and must rely on adults to advocate for and make policy changes for them. [Make space for youth in political initiatives for health equity](#) as they are passionate and knowledgeable about their most pressing health needs and can valuably contribute to political movements. Consider this question: "How do we actually engage and galvanize [youth] in service of a health equity agenda that they can get behind across party lines or across ideologies?" Philip M. Alberti, Founding Director, AAMC Center for Health Justice; Senior Director, Health Equity Research and Policy, Association of American Medical Colleges (AAMC)

> **Identify, collect, and present the evidence needed to make change in health policies and systems.**



"Find ways to talk about equity, to quantify equity, to make the case for equity in ways that actually invite people in to build a movement as opposed to just happily yelling our truth at each other." Philip M. Alberti, Founding Director, AAMC Center for Health Justice; Senior Director, Health Equity Research and Policy, Association of American Medical Colleges (AAMC)

A key strategy to push health equity initiatives forward in politics is to juxtapose the evidence of health disparities faced by communities with [evidence-based solutions](#). Such evidence can [inform political decision-making through](#) offering a more persuasive argument to policymakers. To start, [engage directly with communities](#) to gather firsthand insights into the health problems plaguing their populations. Allow researchers to access local health data and to [administer surveys and focus groups](#) in the communities in order to collect both quantitative and qualitative measures of health

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and health needs. Leverage funding and resources from foundations, educational institutions, and government agencies to support this data collection on health outcomes. Perform analyses of the data that investigates the root causes of health issues and inequities, especially for marginalized sociodemographic groups. Utilizing these findings, people and organizations from various sectors should work together to address the underlying determinants of health that produce health inequities through evidence-based solutions. Collaborative efforts could include forming cross-sector working groups to target specific health issues or determinants, connecting with health and policy experts to assist with policy recommendations and development, and supporting community-led advocacy initiatives to influence politics and make systemic change. Credible and compelling evidence of existing health inequities can be very impactful in bringing together diverse partners to participate in politics in pursuit of improving health outcomes.

Strategically Display Data

Use data visualization to communicate what inequity looks like and how it stems from unfair and oppressive policies and systems. Carefully assess the [best ways to visualize and present the data for equity awareness](#). To garner support and inspire action from various groups, visualizations must accurately convey findings in clear and accessible formats.

Deeper Dive

Advancing Health Equity through Protecting and Promoting Access to Voting

The [American Public Health Association \(APHA\)](#) published a [policy statement](#) on the association between access to voting and health outcomes that outlined strategies to increase political participation for the advancement of health equity. The authors explain that states with accessible voting policies, such as automatic and same-day registration and mail voting options, experience greater voter participation and better public health outcomes while the opposite is true for states with restrictive voting policies. Racial and ethnic minority populations [disproportionately encounter barriers to voting](#) and [disparate access to quality health care](#), and thereby, poor health outcomes, due to a history of systemic racism and oppression. In the policy statement, the APHA proposes the four strategies to address such political determinants of health for these marginalized groups. The four strategies include: (1) supporting the inclusion of voting and civic participation as objectives and health indicators in the [Healthy People framework](#); (2) educating public health professionals and their networks on the importance of implementing inclusive voting policies to improve health for all; (3) public health professionals to encourage voter registration, particularly among those who face restrictive voting policies and are more likely to use public health services; and (4) advocating for policies to make voting accessible, easier, and inclusive. Cross-sector collaborators can work to

alleviate the negative political determinants of health through integrating these strategies into their work to overcome barriers to political participation in their communities.

Vital Conditions for Health and Well-Being

The [Seven Vital Conditions for Health and Well-Being](#) is a framework that conceptualizes major determinants of health, or vital conditions, that work together within a system to affect individuals' well-being. The seven vital conditions include: reliable transportation, thriving natural world, basic needs for health and safety, human housing, meaningful work and wealth, lifelong learning, and belonging and civic muscle. These vital conditions are considered to be indispensable factors within an interdependent ecosystem, shaping opportunities for populations to thrive and avoid adversity. As shown in the graphic below, belonging and civic muscle is at the center of the framework, highlighting the importance of political engagement as discussed in the webinar. The [Federal Plan for Equitable Long-Term Recovery and Resilience](#) incorporates this framework to guide federal agencies' approaches to improve resilience and well-being nationwide. Cross-sector collaborations in communities across the country can also utilize this framework to implement initiatives that target the vital conditions in pursuit of advancing health equity.

Seven Vital Conditions for Health and Well-Being



Source: health.gov, Equitable Long-Term Recovery and Resilience

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About P4HE

The P4HE Collaborative harmonizes goals, advances learning, and facilitates collaboration to improve health equity. It is led by the Tulane University 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.



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](#).