



# Communities in Action

Pathways to Health Equity  
Opportunities for Foundations

A community is the place where we live, work, and play. It serves as the bedrock of health, shaping lives and behaviors, and as the foundation for achieving important goals and building a productive society. Many U.S. communities face significant challenges, like high rates of poverty and unemployment as well as substandard school conditions. This lack of opportunity is particularly evident in the disparities that exist in health status and outcomes between different zip codes or census tracts.

To address the underlying conditions and root causes of health inequities, new partners in education, housing, public health, philanthropy, business, and beyond are joining forces with community members to promote health equity. The work done to improve high school graduation rates, or access to transit, or more affordable housing options also serve to improve a community's health. So whether health is the ultimate goal or a means to an end, communities can benefit by pursuing health equity.

A report from the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine offers promising approaches and partners for promotion of health equity. **What is the role of philanthropy?**

## Why Philanthropy?

The philanthropy sector is already well-positioned to serve various roles for communities as it designs, implements, and evaluates interventions to promote health equity. Philanthropy uses the following tools:

- **Convening**  
Serving the role of a trusted, neutral host by bringing together individuals and organizations from different sectors and disciplines.
- **Leadership and capacity development**  
Programming that addresses gaps within the nonprofit sector by supporting capacity building and the development of new leaders.
- **Model testing**  
Supporting smaller-scale, innovative interventions that, despite being based on robust theories, may not have the evidence base to secure other funding sources.
- **Topic studies and reports**  
Funding topic-specific studies that review and synthesize existing knowledge, projects, or data, and create resulting products to support or inspire other work.
- **Project and program funding**  
Engaging communities in the grantmaking process to make decision making community-informed.

## How Can Philanthropy #PromoteHealthEquity?

- ✓ **Philanthropy can support community organizing around important social determinants of health.**  
While barriers exist to supporting issue-specific advocacy strategies, foundations can support advocacy groups with general operating funds, as opposed to program-specific funds.
- ✓ **Philanthropy can support community capacity building.**  
To create enduring change, it is essential to fund inclusive capacity building for all participants and support the development of new leaders within communities.
- ✓ **Philanthropy can support education, compliance, and enforcement related to civil rights laws.**  
According to the Rockefeller Foundation, foundation support is needed to expand civil rights and racial justice work to target injustice, while enhancing public understanding of inequities, including the complexities of race, ethnicity, and class.
- ✓ **Philanthropy can prioritize health equity and equity in the social determinants of health through investments in low-income and minority communities.**  
Through greater investments in communities of color and low-income communities, foundations can build on the civil rights movement and advance social justice through advocacy and organizing for structural change.

## Example of Action

### California Endowment's Building Healthy Communities

The California Endowment is a foundation that has focused its support on local efforts to address the social determinants of health. For example, a grant from the California Endowment, in addition to support from the California Department of Food and Agriculture, enabled the Mandela Foods Distribution Network in West Oakland to sustain a loan program for local farmers. The "Harvest to Market" program provides flexible, no-interest loans that can be repaid through produce to under-resourced farmers of color who operate within 200 miles of the Bay Area.

The California Endowment's Building Healthy Communities initiative is a 10-year, 14-community strategy and an example of a philanthropic multisector intervention to promote health equity. Grantees, partners, and youth have led or supported efforts to improve health coverage for underserved groups and school climate and wellness by reforming harsh school discipline and suspension policies. Around school and justice system reform, foundation grantees and partners have lent advocacy support for health- and prevention-oriented models. This work resulted in the creation of a Select Committee on the Status of Boys and Men of Color in the California state legislature. Finally, Building Healthy Communities has helped grantees in their efforts to enact more than 100 local policies and systems changes, ultimately promoting a culture of health in local jurisdictions.



Community-driven solutions can take into account the range of factors that contribute to health inequity in the United States, such as income and wealth or employment. These factors are the **social determinants of health**.

## Example of Action

### WE ACT

WE ACT for Environmental Justice (WE ACT) is a nonprofit organization that engages in community organizing, community-based participatory research, and advocacy to fight environmental injustices faced by marginalized neighborhoods located in northern Manhattan in New York City. With support from the Kresge Foundation, WE ACT was able to develop its Northern Manhattan Climate Action Plan in 2015. The development of this plan entailed engaging WE ACT members and 400 residents from 4 neighborhoods in a series of public workshops. The plan focuses on energy security, emergency preparedness, and social hubs, with an emphasis on community-based coordination through bimonthly working groups, which advance policy initiatives such as development of microgrids and solar installations for affordable multifamily housing.

## Conclusion

With available tools and resources, philanthropy can play a key role as a partner in promoting health equity in communities. Working to tackle unemployment, concentrated poverty, and school dropout rates can seem overwhelming to communities, but when actors in the community—residents, businesses, state and local government, and other institutions such as foundations—work together across multiple sectors, communities have the power to change the narrative and promote health equity through enduring community-driven interventions.