A community is the place where we live, work, and play. It’s the bedrock of health; shaping lives and behaviors, and it’s the foundation for achieving important goals and building a productive society. Many communities in the United States face significant challenges—such as high rates of poverty, high unemployment, and 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 tackle 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 works to improve a community’s health. So whether health is the ultimate goal or the 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 local, state, and federal government?

A Key Partner: How Can Government Promote Health Equity?

Communities operate within the context of governmental policies and programs that can affect local decisions relevant to health through laws and regulations, through the allocation of resources, and by shaping political will on issues and approaches. While communities have the agency to promote health equity, supportive policies and programs at the local, state, and federal levels of government are needed to facilitate action across sectors.

Policy Makers and Elected Officials
Local policy makers can assess programs, initiatives, policies, and funding allocations for their potential to create or increase health inequities in their communities. Policy decisions can have untoward effects that create conditions that contribute to health inequity. Policy makers can include elected officials at all levels of government (e.g., city council members, state legislators, or governors) and other staff of various municipal agencies or departments.

Public Health Agencies
Public health agencies can play a convening or supporting role with local community coalitions to advance health equity. Because of existing relationships, public health may be a natural convener of health equity stakeholders. Public health agencies also have the unique ability to: use population-based health data to identify health priorities and disparities; inform and mobilize community stakeholders; and evaluate and monitor the health effects of new policies or programs.

Law Enforcement
Local law enforcement can focus on building trust between agencies and their communities. The President’s Task Force on 21st Century Policing highlighted trust as the cornerstone for just and efficient law enforcement and community safety. Public safety is an important determinant of health and health equity, particularly at the community level.
Conclusion

Government is a key partner in promoting health equity in communities. Working to tackle violence, concentrated poverty, and school dropout rates can seem overwhelming to communities, but when actors in the community—residents, businesses, government at all levels, and other local institutions—work together across multiple sectors, communities gain the power to change the narrative and promote health equity through long-lasting, community-driven interventions.