The causes of growing health disparities in the United States don’t begin in a doctor’s office: They are heavily influenced by the social, economic, and environmental determinants of health. To truly advance health equity in the community, hospitals must look beyond their walls and focus on improving the places where people live and work and where children learn and play.

Hospitals and health systems cannot address these issues alone, but through multi-sector partnerships, they could use their community benefit dollars to pursue long-term strategies for building healthier neighborhoods and advancing initiatives to eradicate some of the root causes of poor health. Hospitals and health systems should also advocate for expanding services that respond to the health-related social needs of the vulnerable and those living in poverty.

To read the report and learn more about health equity, visit nationalacademies.org/promotehealthequity
Practical Steps to Advancing Health Equity: The IHI Framework

According to the Institute for Healthcare Improvement (IHI), it is important for hospitals to make health equity in their community a strategic priority, at every level of the organization. Hospitals and health systems can deploy specific strategies to address the determinants of health on which they have an impact. And they can assess their effects on the community, examining how negative effects may be mitigated.

IHI outlines a number of concrete actions hospitals and health systems can take to begin a journey to improved health equity:

- Begin quality improvement work by considering the needs and issues faced by populations experiencing worse health outcomes and the greatest disparities in the social determinants of health.
- Tailor quality improvement efforts to meet the needs of marginalized populations across the continuum of social determinants of health.
- Include traditionally disenfranchised people in health care transformation efforts and in advisory positions.
- Use the required community health needs assessment (CHNA) as an opportunity to pursue health equity issues in a more coordinated approach with other hospitals and diverse stakeholders committed to advancing health equity. (See Box 7-3 for a brief overview of CHNA for charitable hospitals, and report page 406 for examples of CHNAs conducted with a health equity focus.)
- Provide cultural competency education within the institution and in the community.
- Procure supplies and services from women- and minority-owned businesses and use hiring practices that promote diversity and inclusion; increasing diversity in hospital leadership and governance is especially important.
- Increase access to health care and human services which includes, among other things, building health care facilities in underserved communities.

Conclusion

Hospitals and health systems are deeply rooted institutions that can be economic engines in the communities they serve, holding significant social capital. They are also trusted health leaders in their communities, well positioned to help lead multi-sector work aimed at eliminating health disparities. By leveraging their economic power, good will, and human resources, hospitals can make significant advancements in the promotion of health equity.