Communities in Action: Pathways to Health Equity

Civil Rights Strategies

Our nation’s well-being depends in part on the well-being of its communities. Yet many communities are facing the challenges of access to jobs, healthy food options, safe and affordable housing, parks and open space, and clean air and water, free from toxins—the needed conditions to fully thrive. This lack of equitable opportunity gives rise to disparities that exist in health status and health outcomes between different areas of our country.

Inequities in health stem from structural inequities—the systemic disadvantage of one social group compared to other groups—deeply embedded in the fabric of society, encompassing policy, law, governance, and culture.

Civil rights strategies are essential tools for supporting community-based solutions to promote health equity. Civil rights laws and principles offer useful tools that stakeholders working with public interest attorneys; public health professionals; community groups; government agencies; and recipients of federal, state, and local funds can deploy to ensure equal opportunity for all in a community.

How can civil rights strategies be used to promote health equity in communities?

What Are Civil Rights Strategies?

Civil rights laws and environmental justice policies can promote equal access to publicly funded resources and prohibit discrimination based on race, color, national origin, income, gender, disability, and other factors. This cross-cutting approach can be applied across different areas—such as park access, education, housing, toxins and pollution, and other factors that can affect health—and can help ensure compliance with federal laws that are important for health equity.

Litigation does not have to be involved: Civil rights attorneys may partner with allies and broad coalitions to help reduce discriminatory burdens, remove barriers to participation in decision making, and increase access to health and environmental benefits that make communities safe and healthy.

Civil rights laws and approaches:

• use methods and data in ways that include full and fair participation by diverse communities

• distribute benefits fairly and mitigate the negative impacts of many forms of social and health inequities and discrimination

Using this approach in community-based health equity work can mean drawing on the work of the civil rights movement, including activating community stakeholders, grassroots organizing, performing research, engaging media, and securing philanthropic support.

The 5-Step Planning Process

Community-based groups can use this planning process to assess current and potential policies and practices, as well as to avoid unjustified discriminatory impacts, intentional discrimination, and implicit bias.

1. Describe what’s being planned in terms that are understandable to communities.

2. Analyze the benefits and burdens on all people, including numerical disparities, statistical evidence, demographic data, and other metrics. Who benefits, and who is left behind? Include the range of values at stake to be analyzed, including physical, mental, and social health; economic vitality; and similar considerations.

3. Analyze alternatives to what is being considered.

4. Include people of color, low-income people, and other stakeholders in every step in the decision-making process.

5. Develop an implementation plan to distribute benefits and burdens fairly and avoid discrimination.
Conclusion

Civil rights strategies are tools available to all community stakeholders. These approaches have helped mitigate the negative impact of many forms of social and health discrimination. It’s necessary to continue this work to overcome discrimination and the structural barriers that affect health to help make all communities safe, vibrant, and healthy.