

Lessons

for Strategic Health Equity Grantmaking

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Over the past several years, a growing community of funders has begun to identify health equity as a grantmaking priority. No single roadmap exists for doing this work. For some funders, health equity grantmaking focuses on addressing racial and ethnic health disparities by increasing access to high-quality, affordable health care. For others, it entails addressing the root causes of health inequities, such as racism, poverty, and power imbalances. Whatever the approach, funders are beginning to identify a shared set of lessons learned for advancing health equity work.

COMMIT TO A SET OF CORE VALUES

A set of core values, mutually identified and agreed upon by foundation leadership, staff, and community, provides a critical infrastructure for engaging in health equity grantmaking. Possible core values include: racial equity, flexibility, adaptability, diversity, stewardship, partnership, and celebration of culture. After committing to a set of core values, a foundation can develop a specific process for integrating those values into internal organizational procedures, aligning them with staff values and incorporating them into external grantmaking.

DISTINGUISH BETWEEN HEALTH DISPARITIES AND HEALTH EQUITY

Shifting from a health disparities lens to a health equity framework can broaden the possible ways in which a funder intervenes to address health inequities. Such a shift supports an understanding that a number of social and ecological factors influence health, and that systematic issues contribute to disparities existing between communities. A key aspect of moving toward a health equity framework is operationalizing the concept of health equity, which can include defining the term health equity and explicitly naming the work as such.

ENGAGE LEADERSHIP AT MULTIPLE LEVELS

Health equity champions support the process for moving toward health equity grantmaking, and can be present at the staff, CEO, board, grantee, partner, and community level. The work of a health equity leader can take on several forms. Leaders can introduce the notion of health equity to colleagues, help create opportunities for colleagues to deepen their understanding of the many factors that affect health status, develop connections with new partners, write a strategic

HEALTH EQUITY AS A CORE VALUE

Many funders agree that health equity itself is a core value, and that health philanthropy is responsible for advocating the moral case for equity. While some have found that the economic or business case for health equity resonates more deeply with certain partners and stakeholders, others are concerned that this could diminish or negate the significance of health equity work.

plan for health equity grantmaking, and ask challenging questions about a foundation's approach or perspective. Health equity is a new concept to many foundations, and leaders often recognize the critical opportunity to build staff and board capacity to understand, appreciate, and support health equity.

DEVELOP STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIPS WITH NON-HEALTH SECTORS

Recognizing that health is determined by multiple factors that affect the way people grow, learn, and live, health funders can learn from the expertise of other sectors supporting and addressing issues that shape these conditions. A shared vision and value set help deepen relationships with strategic partners and contribute to the notion that a network of organizations and sectors together is responsible for promoting equity. Health foundations can also capitalize on these partnerships in cases where a message may be more effectively delivered by a partner organization of another sector.

CHAMPION DIVERSITY AS BOTH A VALUE AND A STRATEGY

Articulating diversity as a core value is a critical step for a foundation to take as it prioritizes health equity as a grantmaking strategy. Many funders place high value on the diversity of demographic background, experience, heritage, and perspectives at multiple stakeholder levels in order to make thoughtful grantmaking decisions and to reflect the community being affected by grantmaking. In the words of one funder, "A foundation can be diverse but not culturally competent, but cannot be culturally competent without being diverse." To truly embody this value, funders may develop a clearly defined strategy for ensuring a diverse staff, board, and network of grantees.

DEDICATE RESOURCES TO LONG-TERM SYSTEMATIC CHANGE

Given the complexities of the determinants contributing to health status, the road to achieving health equity is undoubtedly long and requires long-term commitment by funders and other stakeholders. As one funder suggested, “Health equity cannot be an issue du jour.” Making this long-term commitment elevates health equity from a philanthropic priority to an integral part of a funder’s identity.

CULTIVATE AN AUTHENTIC UNDERSTANDING OF COMMUNITY

Advancing health equity demands that communities be much more than beneficiaries of grantmaking. Rather, communities are critical partners and stakeholders in philanthropic health equity efforts and work closely with funders to identify priorities and work toward lasting change. By engaging in health equity work, funders benefit from clearly defining the communities

they serve, recognizing and addressing power dynamics, and creating processes for obtaining authentic and productive feedback.

ARTICULATE STRATEGIC GOALS AND OBJECTIVES

Given the need for continuing commitment to health equity, funders face a great challenge to create change on the most upstream indicators. For that reason, developing a set of strategic goals and objectives or theory of change for evaluating a funder’s impact is a key tool that can be integrated from the start of a foundation’s engagement in this work. Some funders find the process for identifying the appropriate metrics for achieving health equity quite complex. Additionally, many must reconcile questions of whether health equity is a process (for example, how do a foundation’s policies and procedures reflect its core values associated with health equity?), an outcome (for example, have inequities been eliminated through systematic change?), or both as they develop a theory of change to guide grantmaking.

FUNDER APPROACHES FOR STRATEGIC HEALTH EQUITY GRANTMAKING

Commit to a Set of Core Values

The **Con Alma Health Foundation** identified core values to guide its work: community self-determination, diversity, teach and learn, evaluation, preservation/enhancement of cultural and spiritual assets, and build capacity of grantees and nonprofit sector

Develop Strategic Partnerships with Non-Health Sectors

The **Kresge Foundation** collaborates with environmental organizations to promote healthy housing, with the transportation sector to address the health effects of freight transport, and with the food system sector to promote access to fresh produce.

Dedicate Resources to Long-Term Systematic Change

The **California Endowment** committed \$10 million over 10 years to make health happen in neighborhoods, schools, and with prevention in 14 places across the state.

Cultivate an Authentic Understanding of Community

The **Missouri Foundation for Health** convenes a community advisory council – a diverse group representing the strengths and challenges of urban, suburban, and rural Missouri communities – to ensure that the foundation’s board has a deep understanding of its impact on communities.

Engage Leadership at Multiple Levels

The **Colorado Trust** is currently hosting a Health Equity Learning Series to build health equity knowledge, awareness, and capacity among foundation staff, board, and community members.

Champion Diversity as Both a Value and a Strategy

The **Consumer Health Foundation** developed a process to ensure that its board represents diverse backgrounds and experience in health focus, age, gender, race/ethnic background, geographic location (residence and place of work), and organizational and financial management.

Distinguish between Health Disparities and Health Equity

The **Aetna Foundation** deliberately named its portfolio of work “healthcare equity” to focus on investments in sustained solutions to address the root causes of inequities.

Articulate Strategic Goals and Objectives

The **Connecticut Health Foundation** created a strategic plan, including two overarching health equity goals: 1) leverage opportunities to advance health equity in reforming health care, and 2) strengthen leadership and network capacity to promote health equity in health care access and delivery.