

Youth Engagement and Health Equity: Lessons Learned and Community-Driven Strategies



Community Leaders Forum: Call to Action

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We are grateful to Macy's Inc. for their generous support and partnership on our Community Leaders Forums initiative, which aligns with Health Equity Initiative's commitment to equitable community systems and to raising the influence of community voices on health, racial, and social equity issues. A heartfelt thank you to you all at Macy's!



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

While young people are often at the front lines in grappling with health, social, and racial inequities in their communities, their voices are often seen as peripheral to the discourse on community needs, values, and priorities. However, their lived realities and perspectives, especially those from communities that have been historically marginalized or under-resourced, provide fresh insights into the real-world nuances and contexts that are important to build a future that is truly more inclusive.

Beyond laying the foundation for community-driven health equity solutions, youth engagement is also beneficial for the young people involved. It gives them the agency to make change happen, teaches them to communicate effectively and with empathy and stand up for others, provides opportunities for them to become more invested in the process and outcomes, and ultimately helps young people become active participants in civic discourse and citizenry.

It is therefore incumbent upon everyone who works to advance health, racial and social equity to seek out and value young people's participation, and to look at young leaders as competent community organizers.

To capture the perspectives of youth advocacy organizations, and community and youth leaders, and examine how youth engagement can drive health equity, Health Equity Initiative, a member-driven nonprofit membership organization, designed, organized, and hosted a discussion as part of its Community Leaders Forum series. The forum took place on December 6, 2022, and focused on (1) the leaders' experience with youth engagement and how this applied to health equity issues, (2) how young community leaders can contribute to policy and intervention design for health equity, (3) examples of engagement strategies utilized within participants' organizations

or youth groups and schools, (4) key health equity topics of concern amongst young people and young leaders, (5) most promising practices and policies to promote youth engagement and contribute to health equity, and (6) ideas for future policy solutions that may encourage youth engagement and help advance health equity.

This discussion highlighted strategies to encourage meaningful and lasting youth engagement on health equity and social justice issues, discussed barriers that need to be addressed to truly engage young people and value their perspectives, identified prominent health equity issues that drive youth engagement, and provided recommendations to mainstreaming youth engagement in health and social systems via policy solutions and suitable interventions.

Sample recommendations that emerged from the forum include the importance of positioning youth at the forefront of the health equity movement; empowering them to make their voices heard by strengthening their skills for advocacy and participation; involving diverse voices to improve youth representations across a variety of backgrounds and experiences, especially from communities that have been historically marginalized or experience other kind of disadvantage; encouraging shared decision-making; committing to building deep and trusting relationships with youth; and providing opportunities, information, and training for youth to engage in civic discourse. Specific frameworks for youth engagement and lessons learned were also discussed.

This report and call to action include a summary of the discussion from the Forum and highlights specific recommendations for policy change and community-driven interventions as grounded in the experience of the community leaders who participated.

Participants

Forum Participants/Panelists (in alphabetical order by last name)

Armonté Butler, Associate Director of LGBTQ Health & Rights, Advocates for Youth

Becki Marcus, Assistant Program Officer, Local Initiatives Support Corporation

Saahil Patel, BS/MD Medical Student, The College of New Jersey/New Jersey Medical School

Moderator:

Renata Schiavo, PhD, MA, CCL, Founder and Board President, Board of Directors, Health Equity Initiative

Call to Action and Policy Recommendations

The call to action and policy recommendations described below aim to propose solutions for stakeholders who are interested in or engaged around issues of racial healing and health inequities. These recommendations emerged from a discussion on November 18, 2021, at Health Equity Initiative's Community Leaders Forum featuring and reflect the organization's commitment to help raise the influence of community voices on health equity. Recommendations are directed at policymakers, organizational leaders, grant-making organizations, and/or other leaders and organizations across professions and disciplines, who can affect much needed change and help address health, racial, and social inequities. Health Equity Initiative may continue to explore each of these themes in future events and resources.

1) Empower young people to make their voices heard by training them to speak out to their elected officials, school boards, and others in positions of power. Encourage them to eventually serve their communities directly by running for office themselves or holding other policy-making positions.

2) Position young voices at the forefront of the health equity movement and begin by involving them in brainstorming about collective future vision for their communities; identifying causes, needs and priorities to be addressed; developing ideas and proposals, connecting them with city leaders, organizations, agencies, and other stakeholders, and giving them the platform to bring their visions to fruition.

3) Avoid tokenizing young people by meaningfully involving a multitude of young voices and creating enduring intergenerational partnerships for lasting impact on health, racial, and social equity. In this context, genuine youth engagement means ensuring a diversity of voices, especially those from communities that have been marginalized or underserved, as these young people often have the lived experience to understand the need for health equity. It also means to not be dismissive of young people's perspectives, but rather welcoming them and committing to building a relationship based on mutual trust.

4) Strive for shared decision-making to make sure youth share agency or power with adults. Existing frameworks, such as Roger Hart's Ladder of Participation (1), can be used to strengthen youth engagement models and processes, and help young people's develop competence and confidence. This may also help deepen youth ownership in transforming future environments.

5) Take the time to cultivate relationships that are close and transformational, and not merely transactional, with and between young people. For youth to feel closer to their communities and to each other, to trust adults, and ultimately step into the roles of community builders and leaders, it is important to cultivate rapport and openness, and value their wellness, mental health and social connectedness. Mentorship and career support can also help support young people's future path while they serve their communities.

6) Recognize the health and equity issues that youth advocates are passionate about and that motivate them to break through surrounding stigma and silence. Apart from being attentive to gender, racism and poverty issues, example of topics that galvanize young people because of their lived experiences include gun violence, climate change, access to abortion, menstrual health, confidentiality in healthcare, medically accurate sex education, and LGBTQI+ rights.

7) Utilize well-established community-driven approaches like participatory budgeting to engage youth in civic discourse and decision-making. For example, young people can connect with each other as well as with city planners, local organizations and other agencies, and share ideas and proposals on how to allocate funds in their communities and address key community needs and priorities.

8) Support opportunities for youth to engage in local governance and politics and provide the information and training necessary for civic engagement, including civic literacy training, access to local policymakers, city council members, and other representatives. Encourage them to reach out to legislators to model inclusive and equitable policies locally.

Participants

(In alphabetical order by last name)



Armonté Butler

Armonté Butler is the Associate Director of LGBTQ Health & Rights at Advocates for Youth. He supports youth activists in leading sexual and reproductive health campaigns in their communities. He also supports various youth-serving organizations in adopting the youth-adult partnership framework. He holds Bachelor of Arts degrees in Global Studies and Gender Studies from The University of the South. He is a Master of Public Health candidate studying adolescent health and health equity at the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health.



Becki Marcus

Becki Marcus is the Assistant Program Officer at Local Initiatives Support Corporation where she is part of a team that leads the Pawtucket Central Falls Health Equity Zone, a collective impact model that centers community leadership to address social determinants of health. In her former role at the Nonviolence Institute, she managed a collaborative project to support youth impacted by violence across three Rhode Island cities. She graduated with a B.A. Public Policy from Brown University and loves nurturing spaces for communities to make their voices heard.

Participants

(In alphabetical order by last name)



Saahil Patel

Saahil Patel is a direct medical student at TCNJ with joint admission to New Jersey Medical School. He is passionate about health policy and implementing the practicum of public health into the delivery of medical care as a physician. In the past, Saahil has served as an EMT, hospital intern, and mental health crisis counselor as well as a leader for numerous school-based organizations. Equity, he fundamentally believes, is an integral facet of promoting health!

Moderator



Renata Schiavo, PhD, MA, CCL

Renata Schiavo is the Founder and Board President, Board of Directors of Health Equity Initiative. She is a passionate advocate for health equity and a committed voice on the importance of addressing and removing barriers that prevent people from leading healthy and productive lives. She has 20+ of experience working across sectors and disciplines to improve the health and well-being of vulnerable, marginalized, and underserved populations, including communities of color, Indigenous and immigrant communities in the United States, and low-income groups, refugees, and patients from underserved areas in global settings. Renata is a Senior Lecturer at Columbia University Mailman School of Public Health, the Editor-in-Chief of the peer-reviewed Journal of Communication in Healthcare: Strategies, Media and Engagement in Global Health, and a Principal at Strategies for Equity and Communication Impact (SECI), a global consultancy. She has significant experience in health policy and community, patient, and citizen engagement and has written extensively on raising the influence of community voices on health, racial, and social equity. She has experience with engaging young people in participatory processes across her different professional endeavors.

Acknowledgements

Health Equity Initiative would like to thank everyone who made this forum possible, including our participants for their insight and commitment to health equity. Thank you all!

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Health Equity Initiative (HEI) is a member-driven nonprofit membership organization dedicated to build a global community that engages across sectors and disciplines to advance health equity. By bringing together and enlisting the efforts of the public and private sectors, professions and communities that have both a stake and an influence on social determinants of health, HEI advocates for improving conditions and achieving equity in health for all.

We focus on championing transformative change to advance health equity, supporting knowledge, engaging communities and leaders, and building capacity to address barriers that prevent people from leading a healthy and productive life.

Bridging Silos, Building ONE Community for Health Equity!
