

Health in All Policies: Where does equity fit in?

Kansas has experienced a large increase in minority populations over the last 15 years. It is more important than ever to ensure that all Kansans have access to healthy conditions where they live, learn, work and play.

To explore this issue, the Kansas Health Institute (KHI) held a symposium on September 28, 2017, titled *Health in All Policies: Where does equity fit in?* The event brought together more than 60 stakeholders from across sectors to discuss opportunities for advancing Health in All Policies (HiAP) in Kansas—through the lens of equity.

Definition

Health in All Policies (HiAP) is a change in the systems that determine how decisions are made and implemented by local, state and federal governments to ensure that decisions have neutral or beneficial impacts on factors that shape health.

– National Association of State and Territorial Health Officials

Informing Decisions

Tatiana Y. Lin, M.A., KHI team leader for community health improvement, opened the event by introducing the concepts behind HiAP and strategies for implementing it. She encouraged the audience to think through the status quo—who makes the decisions that shape the conditions in which Kansans live and what opportunities exist for making health part of the process.

To build a stronger foundation for HiAP work, consensus is needed around the following three concepts:

- Health is influenced by multiple factors beyond health care;
- Social and environmental conditions are determined by the actions of non-health sectors; and
- Public health professionals can play a unique role, but successful efforts can only be done in partnership with the community and other sectors.



Some strategies that Kansas communities can adopt to implement HiAP include:

- Conducting health impact assessments (HIA) to study the health effects of policy decisions, or [Health Impact Reviews](#), a variation of HIA that analyzes how a proposed legislative or budgetary change might impact health and health equity;
- Sharing data among agencies;
- Considering indicators related to social determinants of health when making decisions;
- Developing cross-sectoral partnerships and strategic plans;
- Incorporating health and equity criteria into Request for Proposals; and
- Using checklists to routinely consider health.

Promoting Health Equity

“The distinction between equality and equity in health is more than semantics,” explained keynote speaker Katie Hirono, M.P.H., president of the Society of Practitioners of Health Impact Assessment and a research associate at the Centre for Health Equity

Definition

Health equity is the attainment of the highest level of health for all people. Achieving health equity requires valuing everyone equally with focused and ongoing societal efforts to address avoidable inequalities, historical and contemporary injustices, and the elimination of health and health care disparities.

– Office of Minority Health at the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services

Training, Research and Evaluation at the University of New South Wales in Australia. Equity involves trying to *understand and give people what they need* to enjoy full, healthy lives. Equality, in contrast, aims to ensure that *everyone gets the same things* in order to enjoy full, healthy lives.

How can HiAP strategies be used to address equity? HIAs or equity-focused HIAs could be instrumental in advancing equity. Democracy, equity, stakeholder participation, ethical use of evidence and sustainability are foundational principles of HIAs. Equity-focused HIAs differ from traditional HIAs because they put less emphasis on the health impacts of a policy, and more emphasis on the distribution of the impacts across the community. For example, equity-focused HIAs could help to identify how different populations could be affected by policies like a tobacco tax increase.

It is also important to integrate equity into the culture of organizations. Building this focus ensures that it is consistently considered in the work and is independent of the enthusiasm or tenure of an individual person. Several [tools](#) are available for meaningfully incorporating equity into policy decisions.

“Work with (not on) affected communities.”

– Katie Hirono, M.P.H.,
University of New South Wales (Australia)

Vital at All Levels

A panel discussion featuring policymakers from city, county and state governments followed. They highlighted the successes they had seen in their communities when health was considered in decision-making. Topeka City Council Member Michelle De La Isla elaborated on the efforts to incorporate health into the downtown Topeka redesign. Allen County Commissioner Thomas Williams spoke about the energy and lessons learned in Allen County around the development of a grocery store and trails. Former state representative John Wilson talked about his efforts to use an HIA to inform medical marijuana legislation.

These decision-makers shared their perspectives on the opportunities and challenges of considering health and equity when making decisions. Discussion also included tips for successfully engaging with elected officials who are often faced with competing priorities. These tips included combining powerful personal stories with data, action plans and other information to help policymakers understand the impact of a proposal on all constituents.

Thoughts from the Policymaker Panel

“‘Help me understand...’ are the most powerful words you can use when communicating with us.”

– Michelle De La Isla,
Topeka City Council Member

“Almost everything we do is about health.”

– Thomas Williams,
Allen County Commissioner

“It might be helpful to use health notes as part of the legislative process ...to understand the health impacts of a bill...”

– John Wilson,
Kansas Action for Children
and former state representative

Looking Ahead

The day closed with a town-hall style discussion facilitated by Robert F. St. Peter, M.D, KHI president and CEO. Participants reflected on the inequities that exist in Kansas, the opportunities to address them, and how takeaways from the event could be actionable for communities.

Dr. St. Peter wrapped up the day by reiterating that minority populations in Kansas are growing, and the questions of health and health equity will continue to remain timely and relevant.

KANSAS HEALTH INSTITUTE

The Kansas Health Institute delivers credible information and research enabling policy leaders to make informed health policy decisions that enhance their effectiveness as champions for a healthier Kansas. The Kansas Health Institute is a nonprofit, nonpartisan health policy and research organization based in Topeka that was established in 1995 with a multiyear grant from the Kansas Health Foundation.

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