



The Network
for Public Health Law

Law and Policy Pathways to Civic Engagement

Civic engagement can be defined in various ways, but it usually includes voting, volunteering, and membership in community groups like neighborhood associations or recreational sports. Civic engagement, especially early in life, is associated with increased social capital, enhanced social networks, greater wealth and educational achievement later in life, and overall better physical and mental health. One reason for these positive outcomes is that people who are civically engaged and connected to their community are more likely to have their voices represented in policy and decision-making. Disparities in civic engagement can lead to health disparities by limiting the voices of vulnerable communities in shaping their environment, influencing the distribution of resources and power, and building social capital. Facilitating civic engagement is one strategy to achieve health equity by ensuring that people and communities have the access, tools, and resources to effect policy change.

Public Health Issues:

How law and policy can help:

Foster and Support Community Development

- **Establish a system** of neighborhood-based associations, councils, advisory boards, or networks with roles and responsibilities in local decision-making
- **Support community-based or community-led initiatives**, including participatory action research, demonstration projects, power mapping to identify institutions and individuals with influence, and community policy timeline development
- **Train community members** to influence policy development and prepare residents to be leaders, organizers, and activists
- **Conduct an assessment** of community organizations and design programs to build their capacity
- **Leverage collaborative partnerships** to integrate arts and culture into place-based community development and planning

Enhance Civic Learning in Schools and Postsecondary Institutions

- **Establish state learning standards** for civics and methods of assessment and accountability
- **Develop strategic plans** with clearly identified goals and outcomes to educate students of all ages on informed civic engagement
- **Encourage service learning** and community service as part of educational requirements
- **Engage institutions** like Historically Black Colleges and Universities and other Minority-Serving Institutions with a strong history of preparing students to be community leaders to identify best practices in preparing students for civic leadership
- **Encourage public service careers**
- **Create initiatives** and strategic partnerships to improve digital and media literacy

Facilitate Engagement in the Political Process

- **Revise public participation laws** (like open meetings laws) and use public deliberation to shape policy decisions (like participatory budgeting)
- **Establish online platforms** to engage and educate users, solicit feedback, facilitate the discussion of local issues, and foster neighborhood networks
- **Use quality data** to inform the development of initiatives that would appeal to a diverse population of participants
- **Expand access** to public data, adopt open data initiatives, and use open data technology to gather insights on community issues
- **Ensure youth representation** on local boards, commissions, and other governmental bodies or establish youth policy councils

Improve Civic Infrastructure

- **Address barriers to civic participation** like transportation, safe neighborhoods, and design of public buildings
- **Encourage public-private partnerships** with businesses, foundations, and community-based organizations to fund and advance civic education and engagement
- **Conduct Health Impact Assessments** before a plan, project, or policy is implemented
- **Review allocation of resources** and capital and direct investment to the social determinants of health
- **Build community engagement** into more components of daily operations and provide access to quality data to drive informed decision-making among individuals and institutions

Support Voting, Volunteering, and Participation in Community Activities

- **Adopt pro-voter laws and policies** to address structural barriers and drive participation
- **Invest in integrated voter engagement** to build community leadership and tie voter participation to policy change
- **Create a volunteer infrastructure** to solve public problems and promote collaborative problem-solving between residents and decision-makers
- **Support cultural organizations** and identify strategies to increase participation and access for underserved communities

Network law and policy experts are available to consult on this and other public health issues at no cost. [Contact Dawn Hunter.](#)