

Elevating the Social Determinants of Health with a Focus on Achieving Health Equity

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Abstract

Authors Jody Levison-Johnson and Amy Templeman suggest that our nation's goal to achieve greater health equity requires an elevation of and effective response to the social determinants of health. Social/human services sector organizations can offer a roadmap to achieving this goal through an upstream population health approach.



Introduction

Everyone needs help sometimes, and to deliver that help, we must take a more holistic and preventive approach to the systems meant to support people's well-being. The human and social services sector is at the forefront of this evolutionary change, one that aims to realign social services to be more proactive. This shift requires greater upstream resources that focus more directly on addressing the social determinants of health (SDOH) to achieve better outcomes. While we have increased our understanding of the importance of addressing external conditions, including social and economic opportunities, greater health equity will only be achieved by ensuring access to a broad array of community-based resources that fully address SDOH. Too many of our systems were structured to work in siloes and respond only after harm occurs. By

realigning and unifying these systems to be more proactive, we can increase impact and deliver on the promise of equitable access to health and well-being for all.

The potential to improve health outcomes and more fully address SDOH through greater investments in human services could transform a range of systems, including health, education, child welfare, mental health, and justice. This will require a tremendous shift to redirect public and private funding to more front-end resources through policies that adopt a more preventive and cross-systemic approach and in the way that services are delivered by community-based organizations.

Our Nation Under Invests in Social Services

The Commonwealth Fund released a report in 2021 that ranks the United States last in healthcare systems among 11 of the wealthiest countries in the world despite having the highest percentage spending of its GDP on healthcare.ⁱ The United States spends twice as much on health care as other developed nations and yet fares the worst in key health metrics, such as life expectancy and maternal and infant mortality. In fact, a recent report from the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) found that the United States has the highest rate of maternal death of any developed nation.ⁱⁱ

How can that be? According to data from the Bassett Healthcare Network and the University of Wisconsin Population Health Institute, only 20% of health outcomes are attributable to actual health care, while 80% are attributable to SDOH, including environmental, behavioral, and socioeconomic factors.ⁱⁱⁱ

Our nation's investment in human services that address SDOH is among the lowest in developed nations.^{iv} Researchers have begun to draw a direct linkage between that investment disparity and health outcomes, noting that "states with higher ratios of social to health spending had better health outcomes one and two years later."^v

The pandemic helped us understand that no one is immune to stress or challenges. Stress can overload families and contribute to a greater risk of adversity. At the same time, moments of turmoil often pave the way for key societal shifts. Today, we must shift our focus toward addressing social determinants and realign our systems to better support all people.

Supporting the Shift from Pathology to Possibility

A blueprint for how to offer all people a range of preventive, upstream resources can be found in the shift from child welfare systems to child and family well-being systems. The transformation that we see today is moving away from the idea that it is solely the function of government agencies to keep young people safe. Instead, government agencies are one component in a shared, community-wide responsibility for child and family well-being with an emphasis on prevention and a public health approach that addresses SDOH.

For our human-serving systems and organizations to truly move to a preventive approach, upstream resources must be rooted in the community and not tied to intervention by a government system or diagnosis of a specific condition. This would require communities working in partnership with funders (often governmental entities) to identify their specific needs and design supports that effectively respond to them. A 2022 report from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services found that a range of strategies, including closely coordinated and funded partnerships and comprehensive care management, being undertaken by several federal agencies were successful in addressing SDOH and led to improved health outcomes^{vi}.

We are at a unique moment in history. Our understanding of what it takes to weather a global pandemic is shifting the way we think about supporting people and communities. We are more primed than ever to think about economic and cross-system resources that emphasize supporting people over surveilling or penalizing them. That thinking is supported by an ever-growing body of research. Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago recently released a brief on the impact of concrete economic supports for families and its correlations to reducing involvement with the child welfare system.^{vii} Their research identified poverty as a key driver of child welfare system involvement and suggested that even modest economic supports could help stabilize families and prevent the need for removing children from their homes. This serves as one example of what new approaches can look like.

Systems Transformation is Complex but Achievable

Reshaping services and systems to focus on well-being and addressing SDOH will require a broad commitment to system transformation. With shared values of equity, diversity, and inclusion, coupled with leadership by those with lived expertise, we must modernize access to supports to be proactive and possibility-oriented. We must create viable pathways for cross-system integration, provide sustainable financing, and remove systemic and structural barriers that uphold racist practices and policies and result in poor health outcomes.

In 2021, key leaders in the social service sector and Social Current convened to develop guiding principles for the sector's work through the lens of SDOH, resulting in seven guiding principles that are critical to addressing SDOH across the sector. They are:

Partnering with the Entire Health Ecosystem: The collective health and well-being ecosystem must be at the table and engaged. We must co-identify barriers to care and solutions.

Changing Power Dynamics: Health and well-being systems must seek to balance power among all key stakeholders. Policymakers should promote and require that healthcare systems and the social sector, including community-based organizations (CBOs), work together and further collaborate to share power with parents, youth, and community members.

People-Centered Focus: Health and well-being systems must provide individualized care and commit to identifying barriers and co-creating solutions with the community and those with lived experience to address systemic trends that negatively impact individuals.

Addressing Root Causes: Throughout history, our culture, economy, and policies have created both intended and unintended consequences that drive disparities in opportunity and outcomes. All solutions must address these assumptions.

Anti-Racist Approaches: Racism is embedded in all sectors of our society. We must name communities that are damaged by discrimination, which include but are not limited to Black, Latino/a/x, Indigenous, Asian Americans, and LGBTQIA+ populations. We also must call out and confront inequitable policies that contribute to poor health outcomes.

Forming and Scaling Solutions: Together, the systems must explore evidence-based interventions designed to eliminate health disparities while also being mindful of opportunities to implement and scale new innovations and promising practices.

Prevention and Early Detection: Health and well-being systems, with the engagement of CBOs, must commit to moving further upstream when developing solutions. Identifying protective factors and proactively supporting individuals and families enhances resilience and well-being and results in health care savings.

System transformation is never easy, but these guiding principles can be applied as a roadmap for change to transform social sector systems in a way that is responsive and better aligned for impact. Because so many of our systems, including healthcare, mental health, child welfare, education, justice, and more, are interrelated, we cannot tackle systems change in siloes. We must work collectively across systems and the entire social and human-serving ecosystem to achieve real and lasting change.

Ultimately, this work can help us bridge the gap between a social sector response that is triggered after harm has occurred and a more proactive, upstream social sector with systems that are aligned and poised to address the needs of all people and communities.

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