

Addressing Health Disparities: A Mission-Critical Strategy

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Until recently, health disparities weren't top of mind for most hospital executives. Today, the goal of reducing disparities in access, quality, and outcomes has become a banner for many leading healthcare organizations and has resulted in the development of meaningful strategies for addressing the problem. But even with this progress, there is much more work to be done.

Ensuring health systems provide equitable treatment to all patients begins with a commitment at the top. This means healthcare leaders on boards and in the C-suite can and should make the eradication of healthcare disparities a high priority.

Everyone Has a Role in Addressing Disparities

Having a diverse leadership team and healthcare workforce is often an important component for organizations to promote social justice and reduce disparities. For instance, Black leaders bring a critical perspective regarding the challenges that communities of color experience when they interface with the healthcare system. Representation matters when it comes to making minority patients and community members feel seen and heard.

The Chartis Group recently analyzed the diversity of leadership teams of 100 leading hospitals in the U.S., including organizations on the *U.S. News Honor Roll*, 100 Great Hospitals list, and community-based and critical access hospitals.¹ Our purpose was to provide a snapshot of Black representation in C-suite positions based on publicly available information.

¹ The Chartis Group, "[Leading While Black: Addressing Social Justices and Health Disparities](#)," May 2021.

We found that Black leadership was particularly lacking. For example, while nearly half of hospitals had at least one Black leader in a C-suite role, only 10 percent of C-suite roles were filled by Black leaders, and within the C-suite roles, Black leaders filled a total of just six percent of common C-suite positions (Chief Executive Officer, Chief Financial Officer, Chief Operations Officer, Chief Medical Officer, and Chief Nursing Officer).

While broader representation is important at the board level and in the C-suite, health disparities will be successfully addressed only if *all* leaders drive both the awareness of the problem and actively execute sustainable and effective measures and interventions. The tools and methods required are available, and more innovative ideas and solutions are continuously being developed (see the maturity model tool described at the end of this article).

To be successful in their efforts of addressing disparities, all boards and healthcare leaders must educate themselves on the needs of the communities they serve, and understand what disparities exist and how best to address them.

→ Key Board Takeaways

- Has your health system declared that addressing health disparities is a mission-critical priority?
- Are there written goals, priorities, and resources to address disparities?
- How engaged and accountable is senior leadership in developing and executing the mission of reducing health disparities?
- Does your health system have hard-wired interventions to address disparities?
- Is data routinely collected to measure, monitor, and help mitigate health disparities?
- Does your health system routinely engage patients and other people in your community to understand their experience with access to care and other challenges to improving their health—and seek their insights about how to address these challenges?

Three Key Principles for Leadership Accountability

Addressing disparities will require more transparency regarding both the extent of the problem and the reasons for its persistence, and a commitment by healthcare leadership to make change a strategic priority. Not doing so would be counter to the mission of every not-for-profit hospital—to serve their respective communities. Given their wide-reaching resources, health systems have an obligation to support these efforts. While meaningful strategies are emerging, leading healthcare organizations need to commit more resources to addressing disparities and measuring their performance.

Solutions to health disparities must be multi-faceted, and it will be important to include actions directly related to care delivery. Below are three key principles that boards and healthcare executives should consider to help eradicate health disparities.

1. Choose and support healthcare executives who are committed to ensuring equal access and quality of care to all patients, regardless of race or ethnicity, and provide ongoing and consistent education.

If healthcare organizations are serious about addressing health disparities, their leadership teams must be proportional to the community health service area (HSA), including representation of all major minority groups. Regardless of their race or ethnicity, leaders should be selected and promoted who are willing and able to represent all members of the communities they serve, and when they are not, appropriate additions or changes need to be made. This also means that the resources committed to support health equity and social justice should reflect the importance of this mission-critical strategy.

2. Develop metrics for addressing disparities that enable executives to understand the extent of the problem, identify the root causes, and measure progress made in addressing disparities through meaningful and sustained interventions.

Capturing actionable data on health equity is a key step in fostering a culture of accountability. Robust data collection and analysis are critical to the prevention and mitigation of health disparities, which is why leading organizations consistently collect and stratify race, ethnicity, and language (REAL) data. In addition, tackling health disparities cannot be fully completed without a research-based understanding of the

core issues. Clinical research must include appropriate representation of minority populations in study populations to ensure that their unique needs are taken into account when designing effective interventions. Finally, outcomes research should capture the necessary information about race and social determinants of health to assess whether disparities are being properly addressed.

3. Hold healthcare executives accountable for addressing the root causes of health disparities in the organizations and communities they serve.

To effect sustainable change, social justice and racial equity must be embedded in the healthcare organization’s mission and values—and they must be driven by meaningful data collection. Organizations can start by identifying changes that can reduce disparities in access and quality for patients who seek care from their providers. Community-based interventions designed to address social determinants, such as food insecurities and transportation impediments, are models for consideration. To be considered a leading organization, intervention strategies must have relevant outcome targets to which executive leadership is held accountable. Leading organizations also ensure that the financial implications (investment/return) of addressing disparities are evaluated.

Maturity Model Tracks Progress

Chartis designed an assessment tool to help healthcare organizations measure their progress in addressing health disparities and promoting social justice.² This comprehensive tool includes five key dimensions that can be instrumental to making material progress:

1. A committed leadership team
2. A strong overarching diversity, equity, and inclusion strategy
3. A model for ensuring cultural competency
4. A plan for measuring and stratifying data by race, ethnicity, and language (REAL) categories
5. A multi-faceted intervention strategy

For boards to be considered on the leading edge of addressing health disparities, all members must be fully committed and engaged. Boards should also establish

² The Chartis Group, “[Health Equity Maturity Model](#),” May 2021.

a dedicated diversity, equity, and inclusion subcommittee with the same authority and visibility as its other committees. Most importantly, the board must establish performance metrics and improvement goals to address disparities, and hold the executive team accountable to achieving those goals.

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