



## MEMORANDUM

**TO:** Region Forward Coalition  
**FROM:** Health Officials Committee  
**SUBJECT:** Strategies to improve health opportunities region-wide  
**DATE:** October 26, 2018

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## BACKGROUND

We appreciate the opportunity to present Virginia Commonwealth University's *Uneven Opportunities: How Conditions for Wellness Vary Across the Metropolitan Washington Region Report* and discuss strategies to improve health opportunities region-wide at your meeting today. This report was commissioned to address the Region Forward Coalition Health Target: All residents, including subgroups, enjoy continuous improvement in the quality and duration of their lives. While we realize people may focus on their communities and neighboring ones, we strongly encourage readers to consider the big, regional picture. We commissioned this study to better understand the different health opportunities that exist within our own jurisdictions as well as our entire region and examine the factors that impact health.

The valuable new data in the report, generated by the Metropolitan Washington Healthy Places Index tool, shows a reality widely accepted by professionals in public health, and one that we feel is important for area leaders and the broader public to understand—health is determined by more than health care and personal health choices fully under one's own control. Our health, and the large differences in health across our region, is shaped primarily by factors collectively referred to as 'social determinants' of health like income, education, housing, transportation, the environment, race, and ethnicity. Many of these correspond with the domains of Region Forward.

It is also important to note that in every part of the region there is room for improvement. Throughout metropolitan Washington, researchers found stark contrasts in socioeconomic and environmental conditions, often between neighborhoods separated by only a few miles or blocks.

## NEXT STEPS

With this new report and illustrative data in hand, our interest is finding constructive ways to improve health opportunities for all residents, especially for future generations. We know the factors influencing health cover several disciplines, so our committee is dedicated to promoting this work to a wide range of government, business, nonprofit, and philanthropic partners, many of whom are represented on your coalition's roster. We also recognize equity as a focus of the Region Forward Coalition and hope this report will help address the need and identify strategies for future work.

As stated in the report, it is essential that we address the root causes of health disparities by improving economic and social conditions of populations in need, strengthen the public health system, maintain access to basic health care services, and invest strategically in our communities.

These investments will not only improve health, but also the economy and social mobility in the region.

We hope community members, government agencies, health care providers, and policy makers will use tools like the Healthy Places Index to identify health disparities and help inform their priorities. We look forward to working with area leaders in seeking cross-sectoral solutions that improve schools, employment, housing, the environment, and transportation.

Everyone benefits from a comprehensive approach, not only the residents in low-income neighborhoods and communities of color, but also the entire regional economy. For example, better education means not only better health outcomes and lower health care costs but also better jobs, higher wages, more tax revenue, and less crime.

We believe our public health departments have a role to play in advancing these efforts, and we are here to help our partners interpret the results and work toward meaningful solutions.