



MEMORANDUM

TO: COG Board of Directors
FROM: Dr. Travis Gayles, COG Health Officials Committee Co-Chair (Montgomery County)
Dr. LaQuandra Nesbitt, COG Health Officials Committee Co-Chair (District of Columbia)
SUBJECT: Policy Recommendations to Support the Health & Well-Being of our Communities
DATE: June 2, 2021

OVERVIEW

On behalf of the Health Officials Committee (HOC), we would like to thank the COG Board for their continued focus on the COVID pandemic over the past year. The pandemic exacerbates every issue identified by the 2018 [Uneven Opportunities Report](#). Communities that were ill equipped for good health outcomes based on the socio-economic circumstances of one's environment have been disproportionately impacted by the virus. Our living conditions are shaped by the choices we make as a community. They reflect the priorities set by policymakers, whether elected officials in government, business leaders and financial institutions, or other change agents in the private and nonprofit sectors.

We must address the root cause of poor health outcomes and identify essential solutions to the social needs of our residents, ultimately achieving better outcomes for the region.

Racial equity must be integrated in these efforts. Nearly half of the health variation in the region can be explained by place and racism. Our health is harmed by trauma and social division. People of color are more likely to experience racism and live in neighborhoods with fewer resources that lack the conditions for good health. Considering the deleterious experience of discrimination and racism, it is evident how unequal opportunity leads to inequities across racial and ethnic groups.

PROPOSED CONSIDERATIONS

Over the last few years, HOC took on projects to identify the communities that have limited resources for good health. Based on these efforts, we would like to submit considerations to the COG Board as they pursue a more equitable, resilient, and prosperous region.

- (1) Address root causes by improving economic and social conditions for populations in need.**
 - Improve job opportunities, increase wages, reduce poverty, and promote economic mobility by using policy action by the government and the private sector.
 - Reform and invest to improve the quality of education—from early childhood through post-secondary education.
 - Achieve the regional housing targets to ensure safe, stable, and affordable housing.
 - Support essential workers with paid leave and create safety provisions to support health and well-being.
 - Sustain programs assisting communities most impacted by the pandemic.
 - Create and sustain programs that effectively link people to needed social services, including food security, housing, and rental assistance.
 - Build cross-racial alliances to understand and address common causes of health threats facing different racial and ethnic groups, including racism and discrimination.

- Ensure future plans and guidance considers varying housing environments, including multi-generational households and living environments with unrelated residents.

(2) Strengthen the public health system.

- Commit resources to recruit and retain a robust public health workforce and infrastructure.
- Support core functions in public health by making investments including data systems for better surveillance and platforms with community-level data.
- Use health impact assessments to factor in the health implications of policies, programs and projects in all sectors, including education, transportation, housing, and crime.

(3) Invest in communities.

- Involve communities in future decision and planning processes.
- Stimulate economic development by business, investors, and philanthropy, and the promotion of new industry in marginalized communities.
- Use cross-sectoral solutions that improve schools, employment, the environment, and transportation to improve health and economic well-being in the community.
- Develop cross-sector partnerships to leverage and target resources and expand opportunities to break the cycle of poverty.

(4) Include health in regional planning efforts.

- Embed public health assessments in the early stages of all planning efforts in the jurisdictions and across the region.
- Incorporate health considerations/metrics into larger planning efforts.

Everyone benefits from this approach, not only the residents in low-income neighborhoods and communities of color, but also the entire regional economy. Economic and racial inequity saps the strength of the economy and everyone pays a price for inaction.

We thank you in advance for your thoughtful consideration and welcome the opportunity for further discussion.