



Transforming the Narrative: Economic Security is Essential for Public Health

All people need access to economic security to thrive. For collective health, we need policies that center equity and people over profits, and ensure stable incomes and robust social support programs for all. At this moment, we can enact policies that address historical inequities and create systems that support a regenerative, redistributive, and just economy that centers collective health.

Despite the fact that the US is one of the wealthiest nations in the world, one in three Americans is currently experiencing economic insecurity. This is no accident: our capitalist economic system was intentionally built to disadvantage the working class and people without wealth in general, and Black, Indigenous, and other people of color in particular.

It is a system based on false narratives of competition and scarcity, borne from this nation's legacy of racism, capitalism, and patriarchy, to concentrate resources, power, and wealth in the hands of the few on the backs of the many. These dominant narratives —such as “pull yourself up by the bootstraps” and “hard work pays off”—falsely naturalize, justify, and conceal the roots of economic inequities.

We have the power to create economic security for all because our current economic structure is a human creation. And to create economic security for all, we need transformational narratives that are explicitly rooted in racial justice and health equity. That means narratives that uplift just, inclusive, and regenerative economic policies.

We can transform our economic structure to create the conditions for our collective health. We can update and rebuild employment laws, tax codes, and economic, housing, community safety, and education policies in order to heal and address past harms and to support economically secure communities.

Economic security for all now — explicitly rooted in racial justice and health equity — will build a just, inclusive, and regenerative future that is cooperative, restorative, and community-controlled for the collective good of people and planet.

A transformational narrative for economic security and health equity is grounded in the following four pillars:

1. Everyone deserves equitable and dignified opportunities to thrive

All individuals, households, and communities can have equal access to participating in and benefiting from wealth creation in a manner that is non-exploitative, dignified, and liberatory. Economic security policies should function to ensure all have what they need to thrive, and people have the freedom of self-determination over how they create and live their lives.

2. Wages and social programs should be equitable, restorative, and focused on uplifting health

Wage laws and social programs can be structured to meaningfully and materially center communities who have been historically marginalized. We need policies about wages and social welfare and security programs to address the impacts of structural racism by rectifying the current and historic exclusion of Black, Indigenous, and other people of color from gaining and maintaining wealth. This should include reparations for stolen or destroyed property, wealth, lives, and well-being in a manner that acknowledges the harm done — by racial slavery, Indigenous genocide, and other violent mechanisms of capitalism and White supremacy — and begins a process of truth, restitution, and reconciliation.

3. Democracy should be meaningfully instilled in all work and workplaces

Work can be reflective of and stewarded by values and methods of authentic democracy, where cooperation and mutual well-being is valued above competition, scarcity, or accumulation. All workers in all job sectors should have the right to unionize or form worker cooperatives or councils, and every worker should have the agency and freedom to fully participate in shaping decisions at work.

4. Our shared humanity and our responsibility to each other — and to the earth — must come first in designing economic policies and job environments

By valuing our collective wellness over capital or profit, we can uplift health across the country and turn the tide on the climate crisis. All economic policies and job environments should be transformed to value the importance of human life and connection, and to create shared abundance for all without waste, extraction, or destruction of the earth and natural resources.

Transformative Narrative in Practice

Below are a few examples of how to apply the transformational narrative for economic security and health equity to specific issue areas. Each pillar of the transformational narrative is underlined.

Issue: Paid sick leave is key for health

Narrative: No one should have to choose between a paycheck and staying home when sick or to care for a loved one. Access to paid sick time saves lives, and lack of paid sick leave exacerbates pandemics. Workplace benefits should be equitable, restorative, and focused on uplifting health. Without paid sick leave, workers are unable to afford taking unpaid sick leave. A recent [study found](#) that 94% of workers surveyed would comply with self-quarantine during COVID-19 when they were paid for the loss of income from their job, but only 57% of employees would self-quarantine if it was unpaid time off.

Additionally, as many essential workers are Black and Brown — communities who are disproportionately denied access to adequate paid leave — universal paid sick leave policies are important for health equity. Workplace benefits should meaningfully and materially center communities who have been historically marginalized. Paid sick time is a critical component of the COVID-19 recovery period, as it improves long-term health outcomes for employees and their families, and increases job retention and economic gains for employers. Paid sick leave policies are one important way to address structural racism by rectifying the current and historic exclusion of Black, Indigenous, and other people of color from gaining and maintaining wealth. Paid sick leave policies are also about our shared humanity and our responsibility to each other, and all people should have access to care for themselves or a sick family member or loved one when needed.

Issue: Job insecurity causes chronic stress at work, which harms health

Narrative: Dangerous and inhuman work environments — like the environments within Amazon warehouses — cause people to be in a state of constant stress as they fear losing their job at any moment. This threat of job insecurity is itself a threat to health — chronic stress can wreak havoc on a person's long-term health. Everyone deserves dignified opportunities to thrive. Our shared humanity and our responsibility to each other — and to the earth — must come first in designing economic policies and job environments where people are safe and secure in their employment status.

All individuals, households, and communities should have equal access to participating in, and benefiting from, wealth creation in a manner that is non-exploitative, dignified, and liberatory. Economic security policies function to ensure all have what they need to thrive, and people have the freedom of self-determination over how they create and live their lives. Researchers have found that stable and livable income is associated with living longer, and can help prevent chronic diseases including diabetes, kidney disease, liver disease, heart disease, hypertension, and stroke.

Issue: Workers in low-wage jobs aren't paid a living wage

Narrative: There is no such thing as a low-skill job. As we've seen in the pandemic, many of the jobs formerly considered *low-wage* or *low-skill* are in fact essential to the health, safety, and the collective survival of this country. Everyone deserves dignified opportunities to thrive and to have a liveable wage to participate fully in society and in health-promoting activities. Living wages support the health and wellness of workers, their families, and our communities. Wages should be equitable, restorative, and focused on uplifting health. When workers are compensated equitably, our communities all benefit.

A Call to Action for Public Health Workers

For the sake of our collective health — and especially the health of historically marginalized communities — we need urgent action to shift how we understand and communicate about economic security policies and their role in creating a healthy society. To disseminate and embed a transformational economic security for health narrative in practice, public health practitioners can advocate for the following economic security policies at the local, state, and federal levels:

Advocate for liveable wages for all people

The dollar amount that is considered a *liveable wage* — the wage or income a person or family needs to meet all their expenses to live — depends on many factors. Costs of living expenses vary from region to region, and along with inflation and gentrification, this number may be more than \$15 an hour which many community organizations are advocating for. Check out [MIT's Living Wage Calculator](#) to find out the actual dollar amount for a liveable wage in your area.

Examples of specific policies to advocate for include:

- A federal minimum wage of \$15 an hour and the elimination of subminimum wage for tipped workers, workers with disabilities, incarcerated workers, and youth workers (see above note, it may be important to advocate for more than \$15 an hour depending on your region)
- Recurring direct cash stimulus payments and direct income support programs for all people and families throughout the pandemic and the post-COVID recovery period
- Funding for states to bolster and reform unemployment insurance systems to respond to increased demand, and to protect those who lose their jobs or whose hours are reduced
- Inclusion of independent contractors, gig workers, formerly incarcerated people, and undocumented people in all federal legislation and economic recovery funding

Advocate for paid leave, hazard pay, and unemployment benefits for all workers

Workers without paid sick time often can't afford to take time off to care for themselves or loved ones when ill. Even among workers with healthcare, without paid sick leave, workers were less likely to get care. Workers deserve dignity and recognition for their hard work.

Examples of specific policies to advocate for include:

- Permanent, job-protected paid sick leave — and at least twelve weeks of paid family and medical leave to ensure workers can take time off when they are sick, when they need to care for family members, and when they need to care for children during school closures throughout the pandemic and in the post-COVID recovery period
- Hazard pay for all essential workers
- Unemployment benefits, paid sick days, and expanded emergency income replacement for undocumented workers

Urge your elected officials to enact and support worker-centered policies

Workplace policies have a tremendous impact on the health and well-being of workers and their families. Workers deserve dignity and respect in all workplaces, yet many workers are faced with inhumane workplace environments and conditions.

Specific policy examples to advocate for include:

- Collective bargaining rights — the right to form and join unions — for all workers
- Strengthen workplace health and safety standards during COVID-19 and beyond
- ‘Right of return’ policies so employers prioritize hiring employees laid off during the pandemic
- Protection against retaliation by employer for worker whistleblowing
- County-wide workplace public health councils (e.g., LA County model)
- Workers’ Compensation to those who get COVID-19 (with the presumption that exposure was at work)
- Universal hazard pay for essential workers
- Strengthened wage-theft laws
- Protection against termination for workers when they are not able to work due to their own or family members’ exposure or illness

Advocate for wrap-around economic policies to support the whole family

Our collective wellness and well-being is more important than capital or profit, and new and fine-tuned economic policies and job environments are needed for individuals and families to thrive.

Specific policy and practice examples to advocate for include:

- Federally-funded child care infrastructure to support children, families, and child care providers
- Student debt cancellation
- Long-term and home care infrastructure that supports workers and families, and that creates a path to citizenship for undocumented care workers
- Utility payment relief for people who are unemployed
- Strengthened economic protections for small businesses
- Rent and housing payment relief for people who are unemployed or underemployed
- Increased access to quality subsidized childcare and early learning opportunities for parents working in low-income jobs
- Expansion of the Earned Income Tax Credit
- Removal of loopholes tax low- and middle-income people more than the wealthy

Advocate for reparations and truth and reconciliation

So much of the current inequities in wages and wealth originate generations ago — yet the harm continues. Wage laws and social welfare and security programs can be structured to meaningfully and materially center communities who have been historically marginalized, which means we need reparations for BIPOC communities, and many other individuals and communities throughout US history.

Examples of specific policies and practices to advocate for include:

- Reparations for the descendants of forced migration and slavery and for Native American individuals, communities, and tribes; See specific policies from the Movement for Black Lives [Reparations Now Toolkit](#).
- Support for Land Back campaigns to return land to Indigenous peoples.
- Adequate funding for safety programs that help people meet basic needs.
- Allocate stimulus relief funding to communities most impacted by historical inequities.
- Public divestment from prisons, fossil fuels, policing, surveillance; investment in infrastructure and services that support community health, including education, transportation, and community safety.
- Targeted homeownership policies to increase generational wealth.
- Incentivize the creation and continuation of cooperative businesses as a means of community wealth creation/redistribution