



5 Ways Health Departments Can Help Ensure Healthy Voting

A healthy democracy is critical for healthy communities.

The act of voting directly impacts local, state, and national conditions that either advance or hinder our ability to be healthy – in other words, the social determinants of health.

Black, Indigenous, and people of color, women, immigrants, working class and people with low incomes, and other disenfranchised groups have been most burdened by a lack of access to the social determinants of health, leading to poorer health outcomes. It is no coincidence that these same groups have historically been [denied the right to vote](#).

During the 2020 election, many communities continued to experienced [voter suppression](#) due to:

- Disenfranchisement of people with felonies
- Voter ID laws
- Voter purges
- Voter intimidation by state actors and private individuals
- Poll closures
- Excessive lines/wait times in person
- Limited access to ballot drop-off locations
- Attempts to overturn results
- Restrictions on registration and requesting a ballot
- Disruptions in mail service
- Broken voting machines
- Rejection of ballots during counting

In the years since, state legislators have [further codified these practices](#) through legislation that decreases voting access and increases election interference. These [practices disproportionately impact communities of color](#). In addition to voter suppression, COVID-19 has introduced new challenges that add on to historic distrust and ongoing disenfranchisement in communities facing health inequities. Health departments have a critical role to play to ensure that all communities have a say in the conditions and decisions that impact their health and lives.

[Read on for five ways health departments can support healthy voting and a healthy democracy](#)

1. Leverage your own resources, people, and space



Many states are again anticipating a [shortage of poll workers](#), with election workers citing lack of support, election system attacks, increased threats, and dangerous misinformation [as their concerns](#). Additionally, older adults, who represented [nearly half](#) of poll workers in 2020, are at higher risk of experiencing severe illness from COVID-19 and are less likely to volunteer this election year. At the same time, [fears of voter intimidation](#) are high, along with the ongoing risk of COVID-19 transmission from in-person voting.

Some concrete actions health department leadership can take include:

- **Give staff time off or allow flexible time:** Give your staff time off to vote and/or to serve as a poll worker. Have November 8th be a “no-meeting” day for all staff to allow them the flexibility to go vote when they are able.
- **Encourage staff to be poll workers:** Where possible, encourage all staff who are willing, eligible, and not at high risk of experiencing severe illness from COVID-19 to [sign up as poll workers](#) on election day to address the national shortage of poll workers.
- **Explore using your health facilities as a ballot drop off location or polling site:** Connect with your local election official about using your health facilities, COVID-19 testing sites, clinics, and other sites of service provision to register people to vote and/or as a ballot drop off location or polling site over the coming month.
- **Explore registering people to vote in health outreach activities,** particularly if your health team works with individuals who are unhoused, experiencing unstable or limited residential mail access (see [You Don't Need a Home to Vote](#)), or who face disenfranchisement or are targets of voter suppression or misinformation. Public health service providers can be important sources of information, assistance, and encouragement that every vote is important.

Examples in action:

Check out Los Angeles County's [County Employee Election Worker Program](#) and Santa Barbara's [County Employee Poll Worker Program](#).

2. Highlight why voting is critical for health and equity

Voting is a public health issue because it helps shape the conditions in which people can be healthy. All of the conditions for health are represented in the candidates and the issues “down ballot” (e.g.,



affordable housing, education, climate, jobs). Voting also exercises agency and decision-making power, which directly improve health. Everyone who goes to the polls impacts public health when they cast their vote.

Public health departments can play an important role in encouraging all who can to vote via multiple channels, including social media, PSAs, and other forms of public awareness raising. While drawing the connections between voting, health, and equity, health departments can also offer guidance and encouragement for people to vote safely and protect themselves and others from COVID-19.

Specific ways health department leadership can draw connections between voting and health equity include:

- Check out the [Health and Democracy Index](#) to learn about the correlation between voting and health indicators including mental health, infant mortality, and overall self-rated health—and explore your state’s outcomes
- **Include messages about registering to vote and voting wherever possible in communications.** This can include in email signatures, signs in clinics or offices, in weekly web briefings/updates, via social media, health department website main landing pages, etc.
- **Write a blog post or op-ed about the importance of voting for public health. Key values to impart include:**
 - Voting is an act of **collective care** and creates opportunities for **health**
 - Voting is a form of **power**
 - Voting is a form of **belonging**
 - Voting is **harm reduction** and opens new possibilities for **social justice** and movement building

Examples in action:

Check out [this article on why voting matters for health, with actions for healthcare providers](#), by Jeanne Ayers, Executive Director of Healthy Democracy Healthy People, & former Wisconsin State Health Officer.

3. Disseminate guidance about healthy and safe voting

Voting by mail is the safest option to decrease potential exposure to COVID-19 for voters and election workers. It is critical to share with voters all possible voting options available to them, and make all options as accessible to voters as possible, including information on how (and whether) voters can access vote-by-mail.



Some states have complicated processes for requesting mail-in ballots, and/or there have been delays or other issues with voters receiving their ballots (one of many forms of increasing institutionalized disenfranchisement). Those with limited access to a residential address can face additional barriers, but [there are still ways to access absentee or mail-in voting options](#). Voters whose primary language is not English or those with disabilities may need assisted in-person voting, and others may distrust mail-in voting and prefer to vote in person.

To disseminate public health guidance and increase access and safety for all voters:

- **Work with election officials to implement safe practices at polling sites**, including designing the voting site to facilitate masking, social distancing, surface disinfecting, and good ventilation, and working to ensure smoothly functioning processes that avoid long lines and keep voting transaction times as short as possible to decrease time in shared indoor air. Check out recommendations from [the CDC](#) (for facilities) and [healthyvoting.org](#) (for general safe voting information).
- **Encourage people to vote early by mailing in their ballots or going to early voting locations**. These messages can be included in the same communications channels listed in the previous section.

Examples in action:

Check out the helpful guidance on how to protect public health in vote-by-mail and in-person voting described in this 2020 [open letter to California Election Officials](#) by health professionals in Climate Health Now.

4. Support voting in your local jails

Roughly [547,000 people are currently imprisoned in local jails](#), the majority of whom have not been convicted or sentenced, and remain incarcerated simply because they cannot afford to pay the bail amount set for them. The vast [majority of people incarcerated in jail are eligible to vote](#), as they are not currently serving a sentence for a felony conviction. Yet many are denied access to their ballots.



Because of structural racism, Black and Latinx populations are disproportionately incarcerated in jails, representing [48% of the jailed population](#) nationally, and so are disproportionately disenfranchised. Some states, including Arizona, California, Colorado, Massachusetts, and Texas, have adopted policies to increase voting access in jails. Within prisons, the right to vote varies significantly by state and individual's conviction history.

Specific actions health departments can take with local advocates to support voting in local jails include:

- **Recommend that your local warden support in-person voting in the jails and/or vote-by-mail and absentee ballot access.**
- **Connect with local or national advocates working to end pretrial incarceration and money bail.** Check out our [2020 report](#) on the health impacts of these practices.
- **Implement the health department [actions to help end police violence](#)** described in HIP's 2020 brief.

Examples in action:

Check out these [jail voting models](#) described by *The Sentencing Project* in Cook County (IL), Harris County (TX), Denver, Los Angeles, Philadelphia, and Washington DC.

5. Work to address the root causes of inequities before and after elections

As the government agency responsible for protecting the public's health, health departments have an obligation to address health inequities. The root causes of health inequities are the same root causes that create voting inequities across populations: structural racism, class inequity, patriarchy, heteronormativity, ableism, corporate power, and other forms of structural oppression that reinforce power imbalances in our society, including who has the right and access to vote.



Health departments alone cannot tackle the root causes of health inequities. Partnering with communities and across government to build community power is key to collective transformation. Health departments can directly address the social determinants of health by preventing evictions, increasing wages and paid leave, investing in education and not incarceration, and ensuring food security and health care access for all. And addressing the structural dimensions of health inequities can increase communities' ability to determine the conditions that impact their lives.

Concrete ways health departments can advance equity include:

- **Collaborate with community power-building organizations**, which organize communities most impacted by inequitable systems, have a clear strategy and analysis of root causes of inequities, and can be [excellent partners](#) to help advocate for needed systemic and policy change.
- **Build your department's internal capacity** to center racial and health equity in its work. Check out HIP's [Capacity Building](#) page for resources, publications, and information about trainings and technical assistance offerings.
- **Check out [HIP's Health Equity Guide](#)** for ideas of how to get started addressing health inequities in your health department or check out the ideas listed in [HIP's 2021 Federal Policy Platform](#) for concrete recommendations of how to address housing, economic security, criminal legal system, and health care access inequities.

Examples in action:

Check out how [King County](#) (WA) has worked to embed equity and social justice throughout their entire county government.

The 2022 midterms will have lasting impacts on the health of our communities and the health of our democracy.

Recognizing how critical voting is to our health, we encourage health departments to leverage their power and authority to protect this invaluable right.

You can read more about the connections between voting and health in this 2021 HIP blog post: [Expand the Vote, Advance Health Equity](#).

Get involved in further actions to organize for health, equity, and justice by joining [Public Health Awakened](#).

If you or the organization you work with have questions about **what's allowed during election season**, call the RoadMap Consulting Technical Information for Power and Security (TIPS) line: 224-818-6468.

About this resource:

Human Impact Partners

[Human Impact Partners](#) (HIP) transforms the field of public health to center equity and builds collective power with social justice movements.

Illustrations and art work by [Rini Templeton](#)

Contact

For more information on this resource, please contact Sari Bilick, Organizing Project Director at sari@humanimpact.org

To explore how our Capacity Building Program can support your organization's efforts to build healthy communities, please contact us at cbinfo@humanimpact.org