

Trustee Insights

HEALTH EQUITY, DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION



Community Partnerships for Future Success

How boards can build diverse partnerships to advance health equity

BY KRISTA D. STEPNEY
& DUANE E. REYNOLDS

Health care organizations are in the midst of a cultural transformation that prioritizes justice and inclusivity in care, quality and experience. And while many organizations have a wealth of internal resources to enable these changes, they can't do it alone. Partnerships play a critical role in health equity, and a hospital or health system's board of trustees is [instrumental in forging them](#).

However, partnerships don't form overnight, nor should they. Cultivating collaboration takes time, trust and communication. [Understanding new and emerging health equity regulations](#) is often the first step because it helps establish priorities and contextualize the impact of health equity efforts on the organization's future.

Armed with this knowledge, board members can identify strategic partners that can help their hospital or health system advance health equity. In this article, we focus on what boards can do to solidify partnerships that improve access to care, advance equity in the workforce and mitigate artificial

intelligence (AI) risks. These areas are key to propelling the health equity journey forward.

Promoting equitable access to care

Health equity directly correlates to timely, convenient and affordable access to care. Two common barriers to access are social drivers of health and a chronic shortage of providers. Social drivers may include food and housing insecurity, insufficient transportation and low health literacy.

Your health care organization needs to identify the predominant access barriers among each of the communities it serves. As a board member, you can help by asking thought-provoking questions and helping to act on the answers.

For instance, solutions may include fostering meaningful partnerships with other providers (including Federally Qualified Health Centers, safety net hospitals and social service agencies) and community-based organizations to assist patients with their social barriers to care.

Ensuring your health care organization has a sufficient supply of providers to meet patient care demands is also critical. When demand outweighs supply, it takes much longer for patients to schedule appointments or surgical procedures. This can have a variety of adverse effects on patients and the organizations striving so diligently to serve

them: poorer patient outcomes, lower patient satisfaction and increased patient leakage. Partnering with other organizations can help increase the availability of key health care services in your community, such as primary care, behavioral health and maternal and infant care.

As a board member, your work might include making introductions between key community stakeholders, participating in planning discussions, attending community events and a variety of other strategies.

Advancing equity in the workplace

It's more difficult than ever to find enough skilled health care workers. Ensuring your organization's workforce accurately reflects the patients it serves is even more challenging — and may become increasingly so. The Supreme Court of the United States' [recent decision on affirmative action](#) could make it even more difficult to increase the number of minority physicians and other health care professionals. However, [diverse representation in the workforce](#) plays an important role in advancing health equity and in making meaningful investments in the economic well-being of your community.

The good news is a partnership-focused workforce strategy can help build strong talent pipelines with demographic and cultural representation that mirrors the population your health system serves. Your health care organization can facilitate entry points for diverse talent by collaborating with other entities, such as educational institutions (e.g., community and vocational schools, high schools, or middle schools),

Questions for boards to consider when evaluating partnerships for health equity

As boards begin to connect with other providers and community-based organizations to promote health equity, it's helpful to consider the following questions:

1. What are our organization's biggest barriers to health equity?
2. What internal and external partnerships can we form to address these barriers?
3. Do external partners share similar tenets in terms of promoting health equity?
4. How might the external partner add value to our current health equity efforts? For example, will it help promote equitable access to care? Will it address specific social drivers of health like transportation or housing? Advance equity in our workplace? Help us mitigate risks when leveraging AI?
5. What type of financial or operational investment might be required to partner with this stakeholder? And what type of return on investment might we see and by when?

racial and culturally based professional societies and other community-based organizations.

As a board member, you can help identify partnership opportunities and facilitate connections to increase your organization's pipeline of under-represented talent. You can also hold leaders accountable for building visibility in the community and meeting (or even exceeding) goals for diversity, equity and inclusion.

Leveraging AI while mitigating its risks

Health care organizations are increasingly exploring AI-driven applications to help improve care, efficiency, and the patient and provider experience, among other strategic opportunities. AI uses could also expand to accelerate health equity advancements. But organizations first must make sure these applications avoid the potential adverse impacts of AI on

under-resourced communities.

Internal and external partnerships can help ensure algorithms are unbiased, the data used accurately represents the community the organization intends to serve, and all patient cohorts will benefit from AI use cases — without negatively impacting specific populations.

Partnering with health equity leaders is essential to mitigating risk. Your health care organization's AI governing bodies should include internal and external leaders who specifically work with under-resourced communities.

They can help establish additional guardrails (such as data quality, diversity and representation checklists) and ensure AI tools seek to identify and ameliorate — rather than perpetuate — health disparities. They can help inform AI use guidelines that systematically evaluate and monitor the impacts on under-resourced populations. And

they can help prioritize opportunities for using AI tools to improve care and outcomes where disparities exist.

Board members can promote these efforts through active dialogue with their health care organization's management team and ensure the voices of the communities they serve are a systemic part of ongoing AI planning, testing, communication and use.

Partner today for future success

Partnerships play an invaluable role in advancing health equity. Organizations can leverage them in many ways to address social drivers of health for patients and overcome other external and internal barriers that impede health equity efforts. Board members can help identify the most advantageous opportunities that will pave the way for health equity today and in the future.

Krista D. Stepney (kstepney@chartis.com) is partner and vice president of Operations, Chartis Center for Health Equity & Belonging, based in Dallas.

Duane E. Reynolds (dreynolds@chartis.com) is chief health equity officer at Chartis and executive director, Chartis Center for Health Equity & Belonging, based in Atlanta.

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