

PLACE MATTERS: Reducing Health Disparities By Addressing Social Determinants of Health

The Joint Center Health Policy Institute (HPI) approach to reducing health disparities involves identifying the complex underlying causes of health disparities and defining strategies to address these root causes. Credible scientific research documents that altering the social determinants of health can modify patterns of health, illness and health disparities. Nonetheless, systematic and data-based translation of this knowledge into policy and practice has been limited, particularly at the local level. HPI intends to address this gap by establishing the PLACE MATTERS Initiative in partnership with National Association of Counties, International City/County Management Association, and National Association of County and City Health Officials.

PLACE MATTERS will enable state and local public officials and administrators and community leaders to engage in data-driven disparities reduction initiatives and to benchmark their activities in a coordinated effort. Working with these county officials and community leaders and informed by the relevant literature, PLACE MATTERS will help them establish a set of performance measures specific to each county designed to identify and monitor progress toward health disparities reduction. PLACE MATTERS will help counties determine (1) the best approach to tracking/measuring their interventions, (2) which interventions are associated with the desired outcomes, and (3) why certain interventions seem to be working. This last item is essential for communicating about and replicating the most effective ways to design, administer and sustain programs at the state and local levels.

A benchmarking approach will build capacity of county health officials and community leaders to identify, assess, and share the most effective disparities reduction strategies. The premise of PLACE MATTERS is that comprehensive and integrated data-based assessments can inform effective local interventions and provide the basis for building on success, making corrections, allocating public resources, and sustaining progress. Over a period of three to five years, PLACE MATTERS participants should be able to demonstrate and document progress, as well as the *reasons* for progress, toward redressing the social conditions associated with health disparities and thereby reducing health disparities.

PLACE MATTERS will also provide opportunities for county officials and community leaders to (1) participate in accountability and learning laboratories designed to highlight more effective health disparities reduction strategies through data collection/integration and analysis, and (2) understand benchmarking as a process for identifying, understanding, and adapting outstanding practices that support institutional and systemic change necessary to sustain these strategies.

PLACE MATTERS will help county officials and administrators and community leaders further develop their ability to access, analyze, and integrate data. The ability to integrate various state, county and local databases will mean that counties can develop more effective interventions because integrated data will provide a more comprehensive analysis and 'diagnostic picture' of their particular problems. This focus on data integration will be particularly beneficial for county administrators and staff because their work is often compartmentalized. 'Connecting the dots' with integrated data analyses will show the relationships among interventions designed address the social determinants of health, provide much-needed context for their work, and likely provide unexpected but crucial insights about reasons for progress or the lack of progress.