

Power, Politics, and the Structural Determinants of Health: Why Public Health Must Realign Its Strategy

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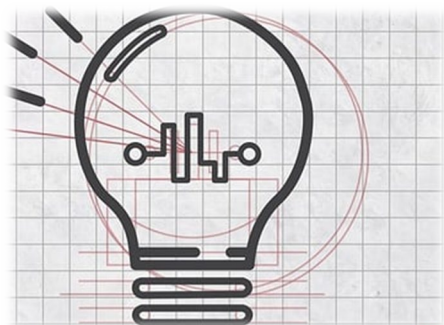


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**County Health
Rankings & Roadmaps**

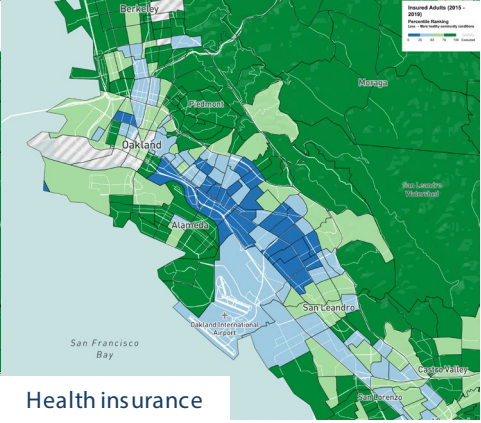
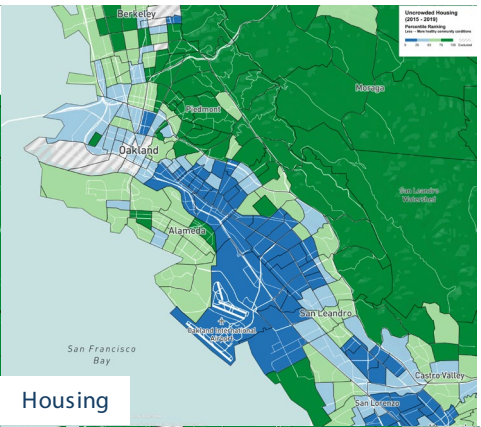
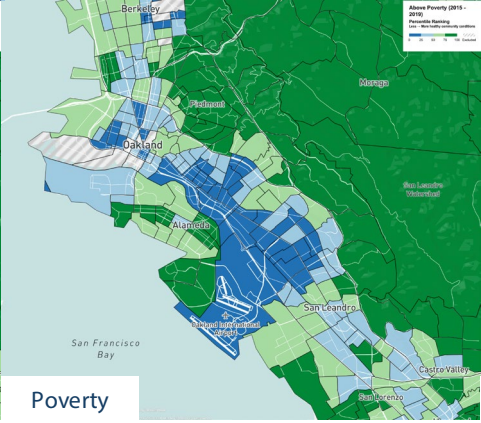
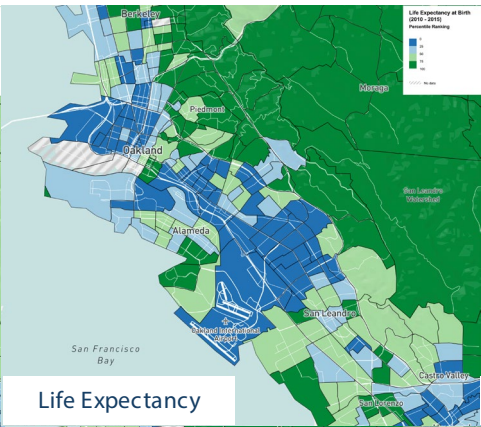
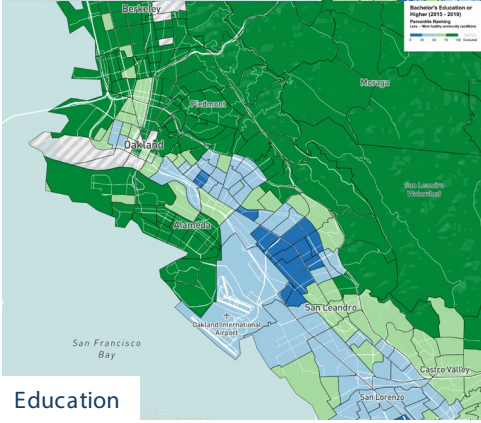
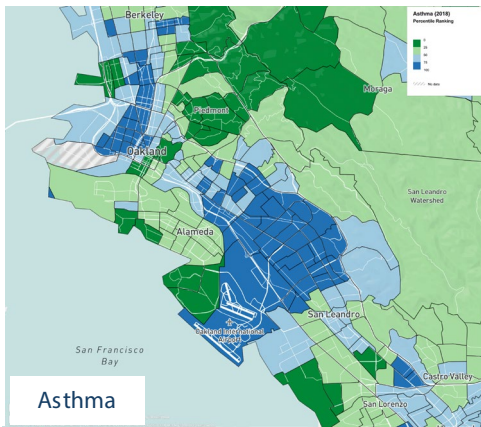
Key Take-Aways



- To advance health equity, we need to change the societal rules that create inequitable community conditions. To do that we must **change the balance of power**.
- There is a **mismatch between forms of power public health primarily deploys**—knowledge and moral authority—and **forms of power that currently shape societal rules** and health outcomes—economic, political, ideological, and physical.
- Advancing health equity therefore requires a **strategy shift: building people power** through partnerships with labor and community organizing groups. To do so, we must recognize that organizing is a discipline, understand its core concepts, and use its tools.

1. Structural Determinants of Health

Health Inequities Manifest as Durable & Hierarchical Patterns



Social Determinants – Depoliticized

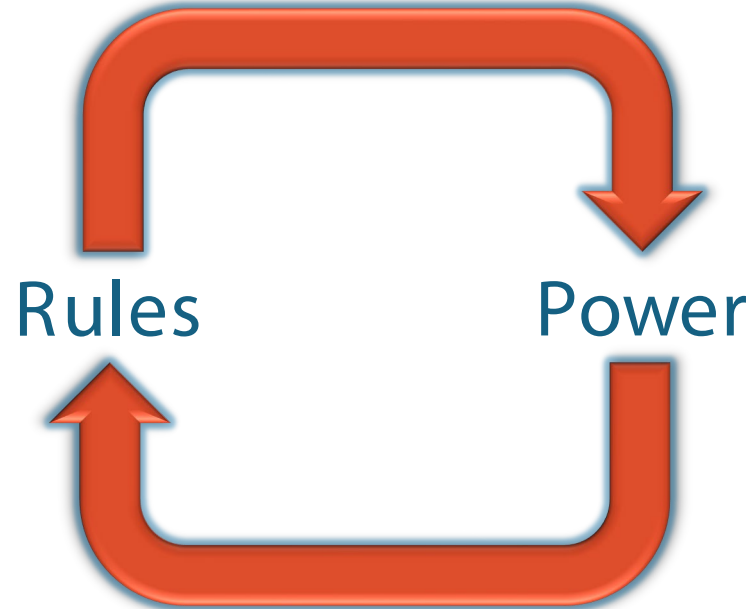
- ➔ WHO (2008): “The non-medical factors that influence health outcomes. They are the conditions in which people are born, grow, work, live, and age, and the wider set of forces and systems shaping the conditions of daily life. These forces and systems include economic policies and systems, development agendas, social norms, social policies and political systems.”
- ➔ CDC (2010): “Conditions in the environments in which people are born, live, learn, work, play, worship, and age that affect a wide range of health, functioning, and quality-of-life outcomes and risks.”

Structural Determinants of Health

- ➔ The written and unwritten rules—and the power dynamics behind them—that create and preserve durable and hierarchical patterns of advantage among socially constructed groups in the conditions that affect health.

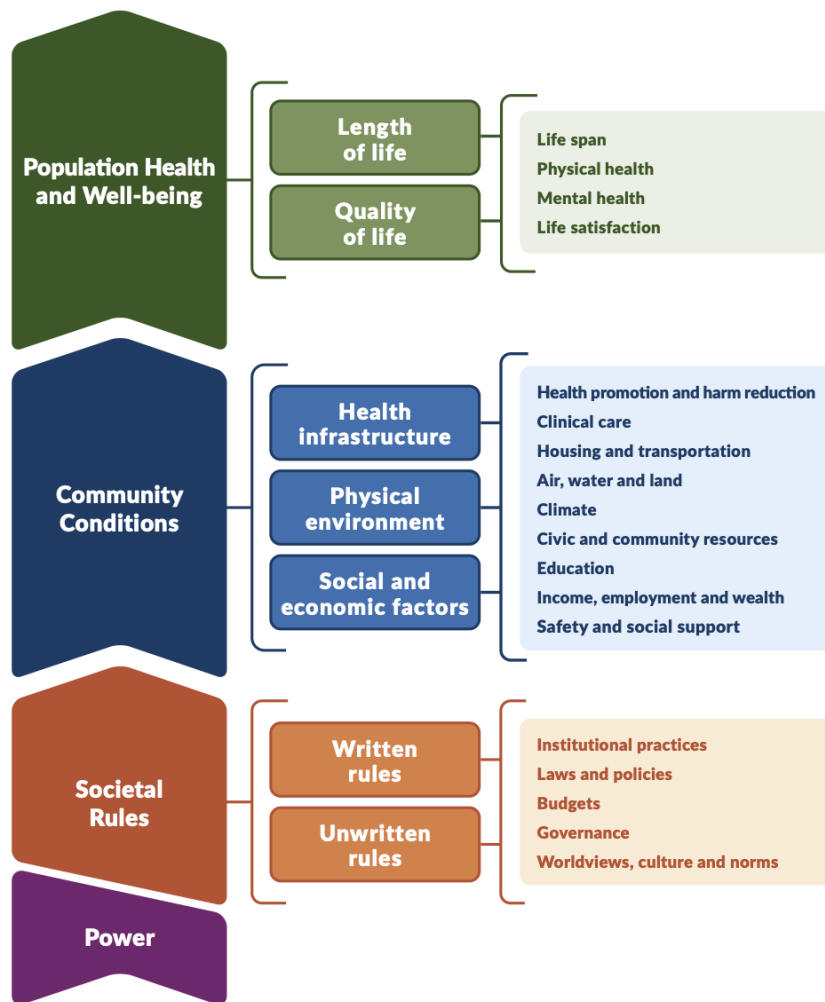
Which written and unwritten rules?

- Values, beliefs, worldviews, culture and norms
- Governance
- Laws, policies, regulations and budgets
- Institutional practices



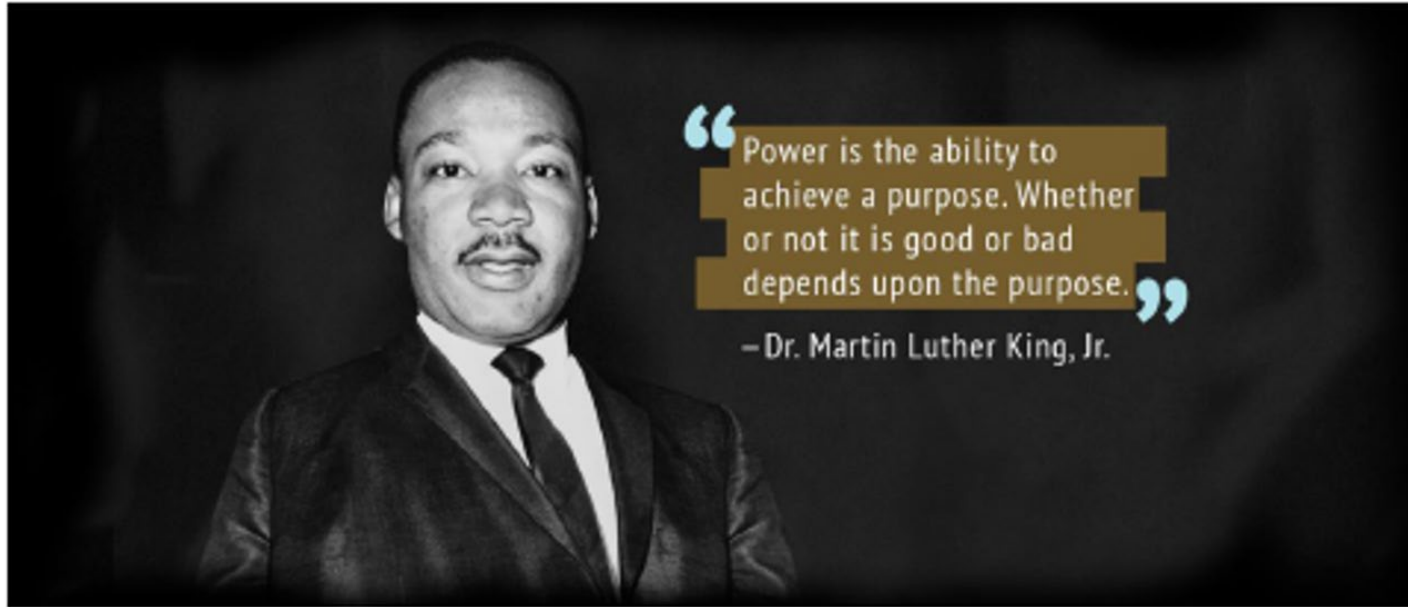
StrDOH enshrine and encode structural oppression

Structural Determinant	Structural Oppression
Values, beliefs, worldviews, culture, and norms	Whiteness as superior Men as superior Try hard enough and you can make it
Governance	Weak enforcement of environmental regulations Inadequate protection from gender-based violence Those with wealth have more say
Laws, policies, regulations, and budgets	Limits on voter participation Inadequate family leave Regressive taxation
Institutional practices	Over-policing Gender-based pay discrimination Misclassification of jobs



2. Power

Defining Power



Power Over, To, With, and Within

Power Over	Domination or control of one person, group or institution over another
Power To	Individual ability to act Communities having the capabilities to achieve their desired ends
Power With	Collective action, the ability to act together Building alliances with other groups to achieve common goals
Power Within	Individual or collective sense of self-worth, value, dignity
References	Allen, 1998; Hunjan & Keophilavong, 2010; VeneKlasen et al., 2007; Popay et al., 2021

Source of Power	Description
	Power derived from:
Knowledge	Information and technical expertise
Moral	Shaping the principles and actions that others believe to be right or wrong
Economic	Material resources, primarily through controlling the production of goods and services and through wealth
Political (or State)	Governing structures that legitimize the ability to regulate, punish, discipline, and (re)distribute resources
Ideological (or Discursive or Narrative)	Shaping how people make sense of the world and understand issues and events
Physical (or Military)	Use or threat of force or violence
People (or Solidarity)	People in relationship, working together in networks and alliances
Disruptive	Withholding consent, resisting, or noncooperation with the status quo

Power Analysis

What sources or forms of power have health equity advocates been able to wield?

Knowledge
Moral

What forms of power have those advancing narratives, governance structures, laws, policies, budgets, and institutional practices that are detrimental to health been able to wield?

Economic & Political
Ideological
Physical

What forms of power might health equity advocates be able to build moving forward?

People
Disruptive
Ideological

Shifting Our Strategies

1. Build our people power through forming deep, trusting relationships with labor and community organizing groups, shifting our focus to the issues they care about
2. Further develop our ideological power through deep and sustained commitments to building the necessary narrative infrastructure
3. Strengthen our knowledge power by democratizing our data and evidence and using it in conjunction with people power
4. Join with others in using disruptive power to stop those currently using their power in harmful ways
5. Use these newly built and strengthened forms of power to break corporate economic and political power and to strengthen democratic control over our economic and political systems.

3. Community Organizing

Community Organizing



“facilitating people to take action in a collective struggle”

– Forging Through the Fire, Future Currents (2025)



“the processes by which people who have a common identity or purpose unite to build relationships, identify shared issues, collectively analyze those issues to understand structural injustices, develop collective goals based on that analysis, and implement strategies and tactics to reach those goals including:

- developing leadership skills
- activating members for direct action and campaigning
- expanding group membership
- building power among the group and broader community to influence decisions, set agendas, and shift worldviews.”

– Community Organizing and Public Health: A Rapid Review, Jimenez & Heller (2025)

Community Organizing – Central Concepts

	Through organizing, community members...
Agency and power	Increase their sense of control over their own lives individually and, collectively, expand their power to create the changes they seek
Critical consciousness	Increase their ability to reflect critically and hold complexity through dialogue and action, including recognizing the structural roots of individual struggles and how the individual problems they face are collective struggles
Base building	Expand the number of people directly impacted by problems in their community who are in relationship with one another and involved in collective action
Community capacity	Build their capacity to identify, mobilize, and solve problems in their community and take leadership in doing so
Develop leadership	Shift from private shame about the problems they face to a public stance, and build their leadership to solve these problems
Issue selection	Identify specific change targets that solve their problems, unify their base, and build power
Campaigns and initiatives	Make demands and take actions to advance concrete change related to the issues they select, building their power and putting their leadership skills into action
Forming an organization	Coalesce their power and make it durable through the formation of an organization driven by its base



Photo credit: RTÉ

Example: Community Action Tenants Union (CATU)

“The idea of CATU Ireland, is simple: A union for people outside of their workplaces. We have taken the basic ideas of membership, collective direct action, and grassroots democracy to battle the housing and community issues of our time; sky-rocketing rents and house prices, precarious housing, alienation between neighbours, slashed local services, and an erosion of our public spaces.

“We think that the only way to beat those behind this – the landlords, banks, companies and politicians – is to get organised ourselves, and NOT just on an individual basis. We strongly believe that real power lies in the hands of ordinary people – tenants, communities, and workers – and change can only come when we act together. CATU is not just for renters, we want to facilitate all people to defend their communities and housing.”

Public Health & Community Organizing

- Partner: Build long-term, trusting relationships with community-organizing groups & support members in addressing the problems they themselves identify.
- Research: Conduct research on issues important to organizing partners, using methods such as health impact assessment or community-based participatory research.
- Policy change: Provide community-organizing groups with data and analysis to support their policy change goals.
- Public health interventions: Invite community-organizing groups to shape public health interventions and services, ensuring the design and delivery reflect the needs and lived experience and expertise of members.

Nail Technician Organizing in Toronto



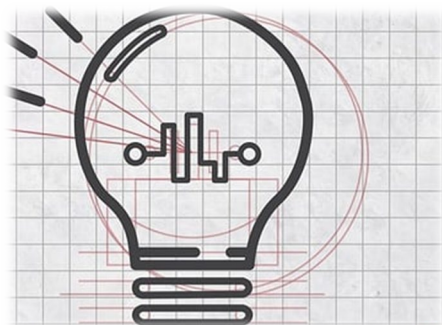
- Health care workers at Parkdale Queen West Community Health Center saw nail technicians presenting with similar conditions
- Health Promoters:
 - Held focus group and then a roundtable discussion
 - Started the Nail Salon Workers Project
 - Supported the nail technicians to organize thru Nail Technician Network
 - Hired an organizer to staff NTN
 - Built a broad cross-sector coalition to support the organizing and address the broad array of issues nail technicians face



**PARKDALE
QUEEN WEST**
Community
Health Centre



Key Take-Aways



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Thank you!

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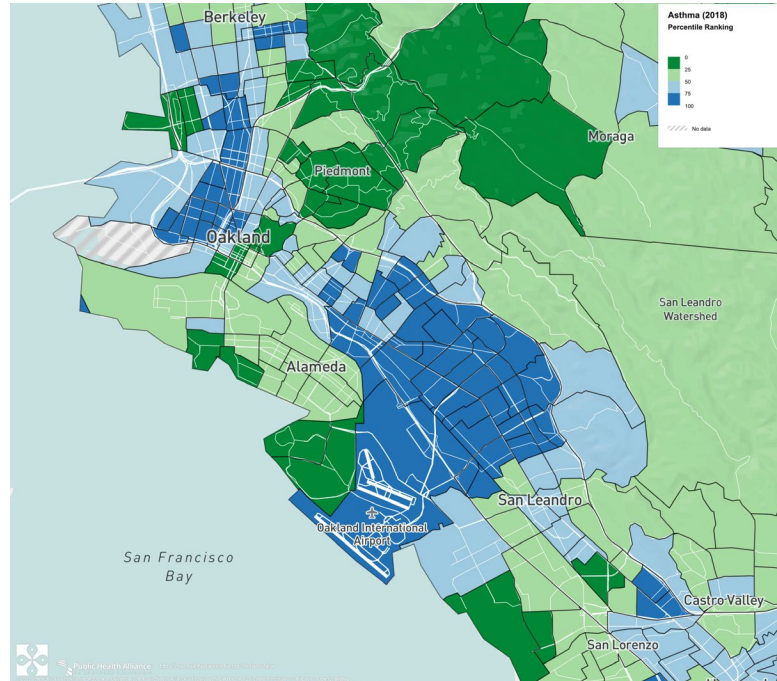
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Jack London Gateway Health Impact Assessment





Example: European Community Organizing Network (ECON)

"The European Community Organizing Network (ECON) is a network of about 25 civil society organizations and groups in 14 countries building the collective power of the most impacted communities across Europe to organize with a progressive agenda for a just, sustainable and democratic future.

"We organize progressive groups and organizations in Europe by building networks, developing organizing capacity, convening organizers to learn and collaborate across borders, coordinating campaigns, and supporting the sustainability of the organizing movement in Europe."

The Health & Power Organizing Project

- ➔ HPOP is a community of health justice-focused scholars, researchers, and teachers from colleges and universities across the United States, building collective power through organizing, alongside community allies, to advance health and social justice.

Returning to Public Health's Roots

Late 19th & Early 20th Century: Public Health's Social Justice Origins



1920's to today:
Modern Public Health Science



Social Change Approaches

Approach	Definition	Core Assumptions about Change
Service	Meeting people's immediate, concrete needs (food, housing, healthcare, etc.)	People must survive first; change happens by alleviating urgent hardship; organizations are helpers / experts
Community Education	Sharing information, skills, and analysis with individuals or groups	Knowledge is power; if people understand their rights and conditions, they will act differently; education leads to change
Mutual Aid / Cooperative	Reciprocal support networks where members share resources and labor collectively	Communities can meet their own needs; solidarity builds resilience; collective care prefigures the world we want
Advocacy	Speaking, lobbying, or litigating on behalf of affected groups to change policy	Experts/advocates can solve problems by influencing decision-makers; change comes from legal/policy wins
Electoral	Using voting, campaigns, or ballot measures to influence who governs and what laws are passed	Political power is exercised through representation; change comes from electing allies and shaping legislation
Organizing	Building collective power by developing leaders and uniting people around shared interests to act together	Systems are unjust by design; people most affected must lead; change requires collective action that shifts power relations

Community Organizing – Toolbox 1

Community Organizing Tool	Description
One-on-one relational meetings	A meeting between two people to understand each other and find points of connection. An organizer uses one-on-ones to understand people's frustrations, self-interests, and drives as well as the people, moments, and institutions that have shaped someone.
House meetings	A facilitated meeting of members and/or potential members of an organizing group. People are asked to share their self-interest and frustrations. This breaks isolation and leads to collective action and also serves as a way for organizers to identify leaders.
Agitation	Creating tension in a one-on-one discussion or house meeting in order to move someone to act and/or act differently (e.g., take leadership). Done well, agitation inspires someone to dig deeper and strengthen their commitment.
Research meetings	Meetings with individuals and groups that help members of community organizing groups identify shared problems/issues, develop their power analysis and strategy, and identify with whom to form alliances.

Community Organizing – Toolbox 2

Community Organizing Tool	Description
Cutting issues	The process of identifying the specific focus of an organizing campaign (e.g., passing a higher minimum wage policy) from a larger problem (e.g., food insecurity).
Political education	The collective process of study, research, analysis, and learning to develop critical consciousness among members of a community organizing group.
Developing leaders	Understanding who among members of a community organizing group has a following and is ready to step up their involvement and then helping those people move into progressively bigger roles with the community organizing group.
Power analysis	Developing an understanding of the power dynamics related to an issue.
Issue campaigns	Members of community organizing groups implementing a set of coordinated tactics to effect change.
Non-violent direct action	Methods of protest, noncooperation, and intervention that heighten a conflict, used without the threat or use of injurious force, with the goal of affecting change. Typically, these techniques of struggle go beyond institutionalized conflict procedures like courts and voting.

Partnering with Organizing Groups

- Build long-term, trusting relationships with community-organizing groups, beyond partnership on a particular project.
- Develop an understanding of the problems members of organizing groups face. Act to support members in addressing those problems.
- Use our positionality to build relationships with others who also support an equity agenda—government agencies, decision-makers, the media, etc. Share those relationships with the organizing groups.

Research with Organizing Groups

- Partner with organizing groups to conduct research on issues important to them, using methods such as health impact assessment or community-based participatory research. Provide funding and other resources.
- Work with organizing groups to collect new data—through interviews, focus groups and/or surveys—on issues they prioritize, and analyze the findings together with group members.
- Develop reports using data to reframe issues communities face as health issues and shift narratives to focus on structural problems and solutions. Partner with organizing groups to share reports and data broadly, including with community members.

Advancing Policy Change with Organizing Groups

- Support community-organizing groups as they develop a policy agenda.
- Provide community-organizing groups with data and analysis to support their policy change goals.
- Conduct advocacy in support of the policy change goals of community-organizing groups, including through an inside-outside strategy.

Shaping Public Health Interventions with Organizing Groups

- Invite community-organizing groups to help shape public health interventions and services, ensuring the design and delivery reflect the needs and lived experience and expertise of members.
- Model power sharing by giving the members of community-organizing groups meaningful decision-making power in the design and delivery of programs and services.
- Provide sustained funding to organizing groups and/or hire organizers to use organizing as a public health intervention, for example, to reduce social isolation and build community capacity.