



# Actions Toward Equity

**Strategies Communities Are Using to Ensure  
Everyone Has a Fair and Just Opportunity for Health**

A report based on RWJF Culture of Health Prize winners 2013-2017

## Executive Summary



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**BY THE UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN POPULATION HEALTH INSTITUTE**

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Cover Photo: Taos Pueblo  
(located in New Mexico), 2014

The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF) Culture of Health Prize (the Prize) honors and elevates U.S. communities working at the forefront of advancing health, opportunity, and equity for all. Through our experience selecting and working with Prize-winning communities, we have found that many community leaders and residents are searching for guidance on how to accelerate efforts to give everyone in their communities a fair and just opportunity for health. What can we learn from the 35 RWJF Culture of Health Prize winners (2013-2017) to guide and inspire others?

Prize winners represent diverse communities – cities, counties, tribes, regions, and small towns; rural, urban, and suburban places – that face myriad physical, economic, and demographic challenges. For example, more than three-quarters of Prize winners have higher rates of children living in poverty than the national 2016 rate of 20%; children in poverty rates capture an upstream measure of poverty that assesses both current and future health risk. These rates underscore the importance of strategies that improve social and economic factors, maximize existing assets, build partnerships, and engage residents to improve health for everyone.

All Prize-winning communities are working to advance equity in multiple ways across the six Prize criteria (see box below). This analysis of Prize winners' application materials, conducted by the University of Wisconsin Population Health

Institute, specifically examines two areas considered crucial to advancing health and equity where Prize winners stand out:

1. What strategies are Prize-winning communities using to address social and economic conditions that influence health and equity?
2. How are leaders, partners, and residents working together to improve community health and equity?

To answer these questions, community strategies (i.e., policies and programs to improve community health and equity) were identified from Prize-winning application materials and categorized according to areas in the [County Health Rankings model](#) and strategies in [What Works for Health](#), a database of evidence-informed policies and programs. Next, application materials were qualitatively analyzed for themes and examples of how leaders, partners, and residents are working together – especially in ways that engage residents from historically excluded groups in shaping priorities, decisions and solutions – and building advocacy and leadership capacity.

This report summarizes promising approaches and highlights concrete examples that Prize-winning communities have employed in these areas, which may offer useful insights to others striving to advance equity and reduce disparities.

**RWJF Culture of Health Prize winners are selected based on how well they exemplify the six Prize criteria:**

1

Defining health in the broadest possible terms

2

Committing to sustainable systems changes and policy-oriented long-term solutions

3

Creating conditions that give everyone a fair and just opportunity to reach their best possible health

4

Harnessing the collective power of leaders, partners, and community members

5

Securing and making the most of available resources

6

Measuring and sharing progress and results

## Highlights

### What strategies are Prize-winning communities using to address social and economic conditions that influence health and equity?

- From the 35 Prize winners' application materials, 1,377 discrete community strategies were identified; almost half of these strategies (620 or 45%) target social and economic conditions that influence health and equity. These strategies are in the areas of education, employment, income, family and social support, community safety, and housing. Most of these social and economic efforts (59%) focus on family and social support (183 strategies or 30%) or education (181 strategies or 29%).
- The nature of the strategies represented in Prize winners' applications has shifted over time; winners have increasingly highlighted strategies in their applications that address social and economic conditions, rising from 33% of total strategies featured in 2013 to almost 50% in 2017. Notable areas of change include an increase in strategies related to improving education beyond high school, increasing social connectedness, addressing some types of housing needs, and building social capital within communities.
- Some social and economic areas are less commonly featured in Prize winner applications. These include policy and infrastructure strategies that increase housing availability and affordability; income and employment strategies that go beyond workforce development; and efforts to prevent child maltreatment or intimate partner violence. While Prize winners were not required to report on these specific strategies and may be working in these areas, these are important elements of health and equity that could point to opportunities for increased focus and cross-sector collaboration to accelerate change.
- Prize winners employ interventions that have been supported by existing research. Of the Prize winners' social and economic strategies that could be matched to strategies in What Works for Health, a database of evidence-informed policies and programs, most (92%) were found to be effective, with a rating of either Scientifically Supported (the highest evidence of effectiveness rating), Some Evidence, or Expert Opinion. In addition, 71% of the matched strategies were designated as likely to decrease disparities.

### How are leaders, partners, and residents working together to improve community health and equity?

- Nearly all Prize winners described intentional efforts to build residents' capacity to advocate and lead in a variety of ways – including community organizing, civic and voter engagement, and leadership development. Seventy-four percent of Prize winners featured specific opportunities to engage youth and develop young leaders as a powerful force for change.
- In 77% of Prize-winning communities, there are explicit inclusionary efforts to ensure residents from historically excluded groups and those most affected by poor health outcomes feel recognized, welcomed, and equipped to participate in shaping priorities, decisions, and solutions.
- In most Prize-winning communities (86%), there are specific examples of how community engagement has led to residents' needs being prioritized, policies passed, and/or more residents in formal leadership positions. In addition, residents with lived experience actively implement programs and policies in more than half of Prize-winning communities (57%) in areas including health care, education, social service, violence prevention, and substance abuse.

## Insights

### What can we learn from these communities to guide and inspire others?

- **Prize-winning communities are addressing social and economic disparities through comprehensive approaches rather than isolated strategies.** Prize winners recognize the interrelated nature of complex problems and are integrating multiple health factors, working collaboratively across sectors, and aligning community resources to create conditions for improving health and equity.
- **Authentic engagement across community leaders, partners, and residents requires a set of interconnected, mutually reinforcing processes that are practiced regularly across community initiatives rather than as discrete or isolated activities.** Such processes include purposeful efforts to build relationships and promote inclusion, especially with those who have been traditionally left out of decision-making processes, and to provide opportunities and supports for residents to participate in information-gathering, priority-setting, and decision-making activities.
- **Prize winners' efforts underscore the different roles that community leaders, partners, and residents can play as they work together to address health and equity.** Community agencies, elected officials, and large institutions such as universities, health care systems, businesses, and foundations are vital as investors and anchors to drive and support community efforts.
- **Prize winners offer compelling examples of fully engaging residents in community improvement in ways that go beyond gathering input and feedback on existing programs and initiatives.** Residents who are closest to the issues can play an integral and decisive role, from setting the agenda to developing strategy to determining who does the work and how it will be implemented. Prize winners' experiences point to the importance of being deliberate about this inclusion, and their stories offer powerful illustrations of how community leaders, partners, and residents can build trust in order to lead to solutions.

Full report available for download at [countyhealthrankings.org/prizeequity](https://countyhealthrankings.org/prizeequity).

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For more information about the RWJF Culture of Health Prize winners and for details on the annual selection process, please visit [rwjf.org/prize](https://rwjf.org/prize). Please email [info@cohprize.wisc.edu](mailto:info@cohprize.wisc.edu) if you have questions.

*The RWJF Culture of Health Prize is a collaboration between the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and the University of Wisconsin Population Health Institute.*