

Diversity as a Driver for Health Equity

When the word diversity is mentioned, many people immediately think of race. However, diversity goes beyond race and encompasses many human differences. It includes our identities and the intersectionality of those identities. It also considers the geographic locations where we grew up, such as rural, urban, or suburban areas, and the region of the US we are from. Our socioeconomic status, educational experiences, lived experiences, and diversity of thought are integral parts of diversity. In essence, diversity encompasses all the unique aspects that contribute to making each person who they are.

Recognizing and embracing diversity within the healthcare sector is essential because different demographic groups experience varying health disparities. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention defines health disparities as “preventable differences in the burden of disease, injury, violence, or opportunities to achieve optimal health that are experienced by socially disadvantaged populations.” Health disparities are a significant concern for Kentuckians. According to the United Health Foundation 2023 rankings, Kentucky was placed 41 out of 50 in overall health. Kentucky has some of the highest national rates of death from cardiovascular disease, cancer, substance abuse, diabetes, and obesity, particularly in minority populations.

The pediatric population also has its challenges. The Annie E. Casey Foundation's 2024 Kids Count Data Book revealed that Kentucky's overall ranking in child well-being is 38th. The state's performance for children across specific domains is 36th in Economic Well-Being, 33rd in Education, 36th in Health, and 43rd in Family and Community well-being. Furthermore, the Annie E. Casey Foundation's 2024 Race for Results report highlights children in Kentucky, particularly children of color, continue to encounter significant obstacles in achieving critical developmental milestones and overall well-being. Additionally, although childhood cancer is rare, a recent research study conducted by the University of Kentucky's Markey Cancer Center Registry has uncovered higher incidences of childhood cancer in Kentucky compared to the national average, particularly in the Appalachian counties. Furthermore, a 2022 report from the US Department of Health and Human Services Maternal and Child Health Division highlighted significant health disparities in infant mortality rates in Kentucky. The report indicates that Black infants in Kentucky are almost three times more likely to die than their White counterparts, emphasizing a concerning racial disparity in infant mortality. Moreover, the report identifies increased infant mortality rates in specific geographic locations within Kentucky, underscoring the need for targeted interventions to address this issue.

It is crucial to ensure that healthcare services are not only accessible but also tailored to meet the specific needs of individuals, regardless of their cultural background, ethnicity, gender, gender identity, socioeconomic status, or other identities. In other words, let's strive to make healthcare equitable for all. This entails actively addressing and rectifying existing disparities while promoting inclusivity and diversity within healthcare systems. One strategy is to focus on diversifying the healthcare workforce. Research has consistently demonstrated that diverse healthcare teams promote a practice environment that fosters continuous learning opportunities and can lead to improved health outcomes. By bringing together different perspectives, lived experiences, and approaches to patient care, we can work towards providing personalized and effective care for all individuals, taking into account their unique circumstances and needs. Furthermore, it enables healthcare professionals to focus on system improvements that have a lasting impact on patient care and overall health outcomes.

I urge each of you to take the time to explore the health disparities prevalent in your local community. Take a comprehensive look at the multitude of factors that create these disparities and identify specific areas where you can positively impact the outcomes. Reflect on your current activities and find ways to integrate them into the broader framework of promoting equity in healthcare. Commit to continuing your educational journey by staying informed about best practices that may lead to health equity and exploring resources available through the AAP. Lastly, the KY AAP Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) Task Force welcomes you to join the committee as we work to advance the Chapter's mission of improving the health and welfare of all children across the Commonwealth.

Sources

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