



Talking About Health Care Equity: Equal Access to Quality, Comprehensive Health Care for All

Telling the story of health care equity is a critical contribution to the country's ongoing dialogue about how to improve our health care system. We can't allow people to overlook the fact that too many are consistently left out of planning, or left with substandard care. And that often the determining factor for who is left behind is income, race, immigration status, gender or language.

Americans value our national identity as a land of opportunity. The fact that such inequities threaten anyone's well-being clashes with our basic values. As advocates, researchers and policymakers, we need to build public will for a health care system that works for all Americans. While we each have specific issues and priorities to promote, we all benefit when we lead with common language and common values. By doing so, we can create a drumbeat of messages that will eventually begin to sound familiar, resonate with, and ultimately motivate Americans to support the visions and solutions we propose.

Why Opportunity?

Communications should always emphasize our country's **shared values**, our people's **shared fate**, and the **shared solutions** that can move us forward together. We recommend invoking an "**Opportunity Frame**" that is rooted in widely shared positive values. Opportunity means that everyone should have a **fair chance** to achieve his or her full potential. Ensuring that fair chance requires **equal treatment**, economic **security** and **mobility**, a **voice** in decisions that affect us, a **chance to start over** after misfortune or missteps, and a sense of **shared responsibility** for each other as fellow human beings. Fulfilling those values is not just good policy; it is part of our fundamental **human rights**—the idea that we all have a right to be treated fairly simply by virtue of our humanity.

We recommend that health care communications around healthcare equity emphasize themes of opportunity, community, security, equality and human rights:

- Health is central to **opportunity**. Too frequently, inequalities and problems with our current system cause losses in time, money and ultimately, health which threaten our economic **security**. To realize America's true potential, we need to do everything possible to support the health of everyone here. This means creating a health care system that works for everyone.
- Americans agree that everyone deserves an **equal chance in life**. But the reality is that many children start life with little opportunity to keep and maintain good health, which is central to their ability to learn, grow, and eventually work. Our current system is failing these children, who are often from low-income and families of color, and it's simply not fair.

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- When it comes to healthcare, it doesn't make sense to expect people to "go it alone". We're all in it together and threats to health are usually community matters that quickly become national challenges. By coming together to support the development of **healthy communities** – with good food choices, clean drinking water, plenty of parks and open space – we know we'll create a healthier nation. Building on this, by coming together to support the development of a **healthcare system that works for everyone**, we contribute to the healthiest America possible.
- Health care is a basic **human right**. Without care, health is jeopardized. Without good health, people can't support their families or contribute fully to our society. We need a health care system that works for everyone.

Where possible, our messages should also emphasize the following themes:

- We should remember to emphasize that a **successful and comprehensive health care system** is the result of a formula that includes access, quality, services, fairness and community. If one element is missing, the formula fails. While we can each advocate for portions of the system, it's most helpful to the overall cause if each of us first draws the bigger picture, links the elements together, and then addresses individual arguments.
 - The goal of all health care planning and policy needs to be a system that works for everyone. To achieve this, health care must be universal, free of obstacles and biases, comprehensive, and designed to meet community needs. If one element is missing, the system is not complete and will not work for everyone. For example, we might succeed in expanding insurance to everyone in our state, but unless the subsequent care is of equally high quality for everyone, some will enjoy better health opportunities than others.
 - Quality health care means comprehensive health care that offers everyone the services they need. Reproductive services, mental health and substance abuse treatment and other too often neglected care are central to healthy communities.
- Messages should promote **thematic and cooperative** solutions, invoking examples and narratives that show successes we have achieved together. Individual stories can then be used to illustrate and strengthen support for systemic solutions.
 - Our history shows that we're stronger when we address tough issues collectively. When communities, states and the nation have worked together to ensure clean and healthy drinking water, provide child immunizations or reduce smoking, we have all benefited. Our nation is currently looking for ways to address childhood obesity together, because we know that approach will work better than leaving families to go it alone.
- It is important to emphasize **community over consumerism**. Health care is typically framed as a consumer good that each of us must purchase at market rates. That frame reinforces a competitive, individualistic mindset, suggesting that people who lack quality health care are simply poor economic competitors. Building an audience for health care equity will require us to present the new frame of health care as a common resource that's stronger and fairer when we're all in it together: **a system that works for everyone when everyone's included.**

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- Because we're stronger together, universal access to care – health care that works for everyone – is crucial. Our linked fates and interconnected lives mean that leaving whole sections of society cut off from quality health care is both wrong and unwise.
 - When we all put in resources, and we all draw from them, our collectivity benefits everyone. When health care resources are distributed evenly and fairly across a large population, everyone gets the care they need before health problems become costly and more difficult to treat. This notion of pooling resources and spreading risk as broadly as possible is fundamental to all forms of social insurance and is particularly important in health care.
 - We need to make certain that we put people first when making decision about where and how to fund health care services. Health care planning based on community needs rather than an immediate bottom line pays off in the long run with a healthier society with fewer preventable illnesses to manage. More importantly, caring for people over money is just the right thing to do.
- We need to talk about **opportunity as entry point for racial equity, immigrant integration**. Health is central to our opportunity to support our families and enjoy our lives. If we believe in a fair America, we should believe in fair access to health care. We can document that the current system does not achieve that goal, and thus, threatens opportunity for segments of the population. Communications should also highlight **systemic barriers, not individual racism or bigotry**. Often, stories of racial inequalities are told as unrelated bad experiences attributable to the unfortunate views of individual players rather than systematic barriers that we all have a responsibility to address.
- Good health, of which health care is a central component, is central to the American dream. To achieve everything we hope for, we need to be strong and ready, alert and well. When poor health care options threaten people's chances, we're just not living up to our promise of opportunity.
 - We must address and remove obstacles and biases based on income, race, gender and other aspects of who we are. There is ample evidence that people of color and those in low-income areas don't have the same access to quality health care as others. It's only sensible, fair and right that we find solutions that offer quality care to everyone.
 - Health care research reveals systematic barriers for people of color. These have developed over years because minority neighborhoods have been historically disconnected from many opportunities, including quality health care services. Because community-based health care is so important, people of color often suffer severe health consequences from our system's long-term neglect of their neighborhoods. We can't allow those barriers to health care to remain and must push for a system that provides needed resources in every community.

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- We should remind people that **investment in public systems helps to keep us safe and preserve opportunity for all**. As advocates, we often have many criticisms of the way that the government is handling a particular situation. We shouldn't allow our dissatisfaction with specific approaches to overshadow the fact that the government is still a crucial player in fixing health care. It is therefore essential to consistently articulate a positive role for government, even as we point out government's failings.
 - Our nation's greatest leaps forward have always come when we have invested in an effective partnership between government and our people. Think of child immunization programs that have wiped out devastating diseases in our country; our Social Security system that has enabled millions of seniors to move out of poverty, and Medicare, which has kept them safer and healthier regardless of their wealth, race, or ethnicity; even the interstate highway system, which connected us as a single prosperous nation. In order to effectively address our health care crisis, we that kind of investment today.

Where possible, our messages should: (a) emphasize the values at risk; (b) state the problem; (c) explain the solution; and (d) call for action.

In our zeal to point out problems, we often spend less time promoting solutions. This can result in crisis fatigue among key audiences, who sometimes begin to consider new issues as problems they can do nothing about, and would therefore rather ignore. Positive solutions leave people with choices, ideas and – we hope – motivation. Similarly, framing problems in terms of values at risk can help advocates engage and interest audiences in ways that a laundry list of “things that are bad” will not. We therefore suggest constructing messages to include values, problems, solutions and, finally, specific actions that are desired of the audience. An example:

- (a) The promise of opportunity in America means that access to health care shouldn't depend on what you look like, what neighborhood you live in, or how much money you make.
- (b) But we're falling short of that promise—millions of Americans don't have access to health-preserving and life-saving care.
- (c) We need a health care system that works for all Americans whatever their race or income or neighborhood.
- (d) Support a health care opportunity plan for our state that will bring quality care to all.

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