*Health Equity Initiative*

# Access to Care Policy Recommendations

## Background

On Friday, October 22, 2021, the National Health Council (NHC) hosted a Roundtable on advocating for equitable access to care. This Roundtable is a deliverable of the NHC's and the National Minority Quality Forum's (NMQF) consensus statement, signed by 58 Chief Executive Officers in the NHC's volunteer health agency members.

A group of diverse thought leaders from across the health ecosystem had a robust discussion on issues that permeate our health care system regarding access to care. The agenda of the Roundtable focused on specific areas of policy that affect equity in the delivery of health care, including:

- Workforce;
- Health Delivery System Infrastructure;
- Health Literacy and Communications/Navigation;
- Non-Discrimination Enforcement; and
- Standards of Care and Diagnoses.

The Roundtable participants began by identifying some fundamental principles that should guide all policies related to care delivery to ensure equity. The principles are:

- Eliminating disparities in the care delivery system will require action to address multiple barriers, such as:
  - economic access,
  - comprehensive coverage,
  - geographic access, and
  - being able to navigate the system and available options;
- Patients deserve access to culturally and linguistically appropriate care that is safe, respectful, and free from discrimination;
- Patients deserve to know how to get care, who is caring for them, and how their care is being administered;
- Access to care must not be dependent on patients' ability to physically get to the site of care. While providers must be more prevalent in underserved areas, barriers still

exist for people with disabilities and chronic conditions in accessing settings of care even when they are in their neighborhood; and

- Addressing equity in access to care will produce better care for everyone, regardless of economic status, race, gender identity, or sex.

## Policy Recommendations

NHC members identified two categories of policy priorities. The first category includes policy recommendations that can be achieved in the short term, including those that have been proposed in Congress or by the Administration. The NHC seeks to raise the profile of these efforts throughout the health ecosystem. The second set of recommendations includes issues that are more complex and need Congressional and regulatory action, and private-sector partnerships to achieve. These will require greater levels of research, policy development, and socialization.

**Short-Term Priorities**

- Increase investment in the federal safety net health care programs such as Community Health Centers and the National Health Service Corps.

- Clarify, strengthen, and enforce existing federal non-discrimination laws.

- Educate patients on their legal rights and build support for medical-legal partnerships such as the National Center for Medical-Legal Partnerships.

- Increase access to telehealth to assure more people can access health services. In 2020, the NHC joined with 34 national patient organizations to endorse a set of telehealth principles. The primary focus of any policy should be supporting providers and patients working together to decide what type of visit is most appropriate for them.
    o Any expansion of telehealth services must be designed to reduce health disparities and must not perpetuate them.

**More Complex but Critical Issues**

- Increase the diversity of the health care workforce through:

    o Utilizing K-12 evidence-based pipeline programs and

    o Increasing the number of HBCU and minority-serving institution (MSI) Medical and Nursing Schools residency slots.



- Address ways that clinical assessment tools and diagnostics increase health disparities.

- Improve data and data sharing to be comprehensive and consistent including data on things such as sexual orientation, gender identity, race/ethnicity, disability status,

language, veteran status, and social needs (potentially through improved and better utilized medical billing Z codes that document SDOH data such as housing status, food insecurity, transportation access, etc.). It is important this be done in a way that protects patients' privacy and rights.

- Provide accurate health education to improve the population's health care literacy in culturally and linguistically appropriate ways.

# About the Health Equity Initiative

The NHC hosted a series of Roundtables in 2021. The Roundtables are based on the issues identified in the Consensus Statement, which are:

- Advocate for equitable access to affordable and comprehensive health insurance coverage;
- Promote an inclusive, equitable, accessible, and high-quality care delivery system;
- Collaborate with the biomedical and health-services research and the health economics ecosystem to support equity in development and valuation of new and innovative treatments and services; and
- Partner with organizations that have a track record in addressing social determinants of health to reduce health disparities.

The NHC's Health Equity Task Force serves as advisors for our health equity initiatives by helping to ideate and prioritize the Roundtables, identify other member-facing resources, and advise the NHC on planning additional activities. Supporting the task force were four Roundtable work groups that each focused on one of the issues outlined in our consensus statement.

The NHC would like to thank the many partner organizations, both NHC members and non-members, who assisted in developing this report. We would particularly like to thank the nearly 75 national organizations representing patient groups, providers, civil rights groups, insurers, the biopharmaceutical industry, medical education, and other sectors that had direct involvement in developing these priorities.

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For more information, visit https://nationalhealthcouncil.org/issue/health-equity/ .