

Investing in Lasting Change: The Benefits of Advocating for Communities of Color

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Opinion

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Many people proclaim that new national health care reform laws will change our broken system by providing more people with affordable insurance, and there is some truth to that. This historic legislation will, thankfully, reduce the number of people who live without any protection from unforeseen health care disasters.

But somewhere in the wake of the reform bill's passage, we lost sight of a critical truth as pundits argued over Obamacare, death panels, and constitutional rights. All but ignored is the fact that the people most affected by our dysfunctional health care system — our communities of color — are mostly being left out of these policy conversations. Changing this dynamic will require a greater level of leadership and advocacy to provide those communities with the health equity they deserve.

Just as health and human rights advocates played a key role in urging politicians to sign health care reform into law, communities of color must become advocates and demand policies and systemic change that can guarantee and protect their health interests. Northwest Health Foundation believes that the philanthropic community can play an important role in this transition.

Numerous studies have shown that our national health care system underinsures, underprotects, and underserves non-Whites, including African Americans, Hispanics, and Native American communities. In Oregon, Northwest

Health Foundation recently funded a study by the Coalition of Communities of Color and Portland State University which showed that 22 percent of non-White people in Portland's most populous region are uninsured. That number rises to nearly 30 percent in Native American and Hispanic communities. Compare that with 14 percent of whites and one begins to ask how we can change those statistics.

This disparity has broad implications. Communities of color are more likely to suffer from preventable diseases such as

Type II diabetes, high blood pressure, and heart disease. Last year, the U.S. Center for Disease Control and Prevention reported that African Americans are nearly 10 times more likely to die from complications of HIV/AIDS than Whites.

These statistics have implications well beyond the affected communities, and it's important that everyone get behind the change necessary to reduce these disparities. Businesses, for example, have an interest in expanding the potential pool of

prospective employees available to them. Educators have an interest in maintaining a healthy student body, as unhealthy students have a much more difficult time performing in school. And all taxpayers have an interest in equity, as extreme health disparities end up soaking up public dollars in downstream medical costs.

As the need for greater advocacy among our communities became evident in our foundation, we began to turn our attention towards helping communities create lasting change. Today, many of our grants focus on advocacy training, policy development, and lobbying assistance with the long-term goal of inciting broad civic engagement and making our communities part of the decision-making system.

While we have personally seen that the rewards far exceed the investment in this work, new research confirms our experience. A recent report published by the National Committee for Responsible Philanthropy finds that every dollar invested in advocacy, civic engagement, and organizing translates into roughly \$150 in benefits to the community.

We recently awarded nearly \$500,000 in health care reform grants to community organizations throughout Oregon representing traditionally underserved populations. We paired these organizations with seasoned advocacy groups to ensure that they get the tools necessary to mobilize and advocate for policies that will have a positive, long-term impact on access to health care for the populations they represent.

Through these grants, we hope to increase the presence of diverse voices in policy negotiation, incorporate health equity into the larger health reform conversation, and ensure that issues of public health and prevention are integrated within health care reform efforts. Because they are most adversely affected by our current system, communities of color and other traditionally underserved communities stand to gain the most from becoming involved in these conversations.

The challenges facing our nation's communities of color, health-related, health care-related and otherwise, are extensive and complex. No single law or politician can address all of them, which is why so much of the burden falls on us in the philanthropic community to help organize and mobilize to make lasting change.

To everyone who cares about diversity, equity, and progress, I say: Let's not delay! Becoming an advocate is not only within reach, it is a necessary step in creating healthy and thriving communities for all. ●

Thomas Aschenbrenner is the president of Northwest Health Foundation. Based in Portland, Oregon, Northwest Health Foundation supports community engagement and policy for health care reform, public health re-vitalization and the promotion of an effective health workforce.