

IMPROVING HEALTH EQUITY THROUGH EXPANDED VOTER ACCESS

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To: Secretary Xavier Becerra and the Health & Human Services Team

Date: August 23, 2021 - one month before agency voter access plans are due to the White House

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: The Biden Administration’s Executive Order on voter access presents a unique opportunity for HHS to improve health equity by embracing voter access.

“Some things in America should be simple and straightforward. Perhaps the most important of those things – the most fundamental of those things – is the right to vote.” – President Biden

In light of the [Biden Administration’s Executive Order on voter access](#), Health & Human Services (HHS) has a unique and historic opportunity to highlight and strengthen the link between voting and health.

As each division & agency shapes its portion of the voter access plan, we recommend considering 4 areas:

1. Establishing new evaluation metrics, collecting data, and promoting research on voter access,
2. Supporting State and Local agencies in enhancing voter registration opportunities,
3. Facilitating voter registration in interactions with HHS stakeholders, and
4. Issuing guidance on voter registration and safe voting.

The below sections speak to each of these areas in more depth and offer specific high-impact opportunities within HHS to advance voter access.

INTRODUCTION: Years of evidence support the link between voting and health.

While civic engagement and social inclusion have long been understood as social determinants of health, the pandemic crystalized this connection for tens of thousands of healthcare providers, hundreds of hospitals, and dozens of healthcare associations & public health agencies.¹ Under the spotlight of the pandemic, health leaders grappled with an influx of patients stricken with COVID-19 primarily due to social factors outside of their control. As part of their response to the inequities before them, healthcare providers helped their patients register to vote and request their absentee ballot so that those most marginalized by the health system could have a voice fixing it - and so that they could cast their ballot safely at the same time.

Global, national, local, and individual data all point to voting as a social and political determinant of health.² Over the last year, informed and influential voices ranging from [David Blumenthal and Margaret Hamburg](#) to former CMS administrator [Donald Berwick](#) have uplifted this relationship and the idea that we need a healthy democracy in order to have healthy, thriving communities. In addition, [new tools](#) have been developed to further articulate this link.

¹ Martin, Alister et al. “Health care-based voter registration: a new kind of healing.” International Journal of Emergency Medicine vol. 14,1 26. 30 Apr. 2021, doi:10.1186/s12245-021-00351-y.

² Dawes, Daniel E. The Political Determinants of Health. Johns Hopkins University Press, 2020; Fujiwara, Thomas. “Voting technology, political responsiveness, and infant health: Evidence from Brazil.” Econometrica, vol. 83, no. 2, Econometric Society, 2015, pp. 423–64; Hajnal, Zoltan. America’s Uneven Democracy: Race, Turnout, and Representation in City Politics. Cambridge University Press, 2010; Kim S, Kim CY, You MS. Civic participation and self-rated health: a cross-national multi-level analysis using the world value survey. J Prev Med Public Health. 2015;48(1):18–27.

From the start, the Biden Administration has been committed to building a healthy democracy by prioritizing voter access. While most efforts on this front are legislative, [President Biden's March Executive Order](#) requests that every federal agency support this broader priority by submitting a plan for expanding voter access by September 23, 2021. Given HHS' current emphasis on health equity, there is now a unique opportunity to set a new normal, highlight and strengthen the link between voting and health, and ensure the health of all by facilitating access to the ballot.

RECOMMENDATIONS: Each division & agency can explore 4 areas to help shape its voter access plan.

#1: Establish new evaluation metrics, collect data, and promote research on voter access and impact:

Incorporating goals around voter participation into HHS activities can encourage organizations, public health departments, and more to incorporate voter access. High-impact opportunities include:

- HHS [restoring voter participation metrics to Healthy People 2030](#) and including these measures in other health data sets

#2: Support State and Local agencies in enhancing voter registration opportunities:

Local agencies have supported innovative efforts in the past and can become excellent partners for expanding voter access.

High-impact opportunities include:

- CMS partnering with one or several states to [encourage Medicaid Automatic Voter Registration](#)
- HHS identifying state Head Start programs to pilot expanded voter access for Head Start families

#3: Facilitate voter registration in interactions with HHS stakeholders:

Through both its direct services and through its grant requirements, HHS can expand voter access. High-impact opportunities include:

- Prominently featuring voter registration [through the federal ACA exchange to participants upon enrollment](#) - and encouraging state exchanges to do the same³
- IHS [accepting states' NVRA designations](#) and further integrating voter registration at all facilities

#4: Issue guidance on voter registration and safe voting:

HHS can encourage voter registration in health spaces by clarifying guidelines for interested health spaces. High-impact opportunities include:

- HRSA issuing a PAL or other guidance that creates clarifications and safe harbor clauses for community health centers, in particular addressing those centers who receive federal funds
- HHS creating a webpage similar to [telehealth.hhs.gov](#) that gives clear guidelines for hospitals, clinics, and providers interested in healthcare-based voter registration

CONCLUSION: This is a historic chance to expand the role of healthcare organizations and human services agencies in advancing the health of individuals and communities through voting.

Last year, tens of thousands of healthcare providers and hundreds of hospitals and organizations expanded voter access for patients. HHS has a historic opportunity to reinforce the impact of voting on health inequities by opening the door for even more healthcare institutions to engage in voter registration efforts. Our diverse and broad coalition of health and democracy organizations looks forward to partnering with you to develop and implement the above opportunities in the months to come.

³ The toolkit linked here gives guidance to state health insurance exchanges about NVRA compliance. We are sharing it to provide details about the kind of voter registration services we advocate HHS provide to clients through the federal health insurance exchange. Not everything may be applicable, but the toolkit should provide a helpful roadmap.