



## Civic Engagement and Population Health

### Policy Statement

September 2023

#### Position Statement

The American Heart Association believes an active and engaged electorate strengthens the ability of a community to preserve, protect, and improve health. The association encourages and supports non-partisan civic engagement as a tool to increase civic responsibility and build social connections, which can reduce cardiovascular disease risk, enhance community resilience, and improve inequities. This policy statement outlines evidence regarding the efficacy of civic engagement in improving health outcomes, priorities for the American Heart Association's participation in civic engagement activities, and recommendations for ongoing involvement in civic engagement promotion.

Civic engagement means working to make a difference in the civic life of our communities and developing the combination of knowledge, skills, values, and motivation to make that difference. It means promoting the quality of life in a community, through both political and non-political processes. Examples of public and private-sector civic engagement activities include voting, volunteering, advocating for policy change, joining social and religious organizations, and donating to charities<sup>1</sup>

With over 40 million volunteers nationwide, The American Heart Association recognizes the power of civic engagement to increase community-driven policy reform in the fight against heart disease and stroke.<sup>2</sup> The American Heart Association believes that the value of civic engagement lies in the empowerment and collective agency communities gain by maximizing their efforts to influence and inform the institutions that shape their lives and health.<sup>3</sup> The American Heart Association recognizes that meaningful civic engagement can help mitigate inequality, and can empower historically marginalized communities.

In addition to creating healthier policies and communities, an individual's civic engagement may improve their health. As detailed below, multiple studies have identified associations between civic engagement and health factors related to cardiovascular risk and disease.

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An informed democracy requires many voices to be heard in shaping and implementing public policy.<sup>4</sup> As a 501(c)(3) organization,<sup>1</sup> the American Heart Association, and its volunteers, are well-positioned to be a non-partisan trusted voice to provide subject matter expertise, evaluation, innovation, and education to policymakers on the prevention of heart disease and stroke.<sup>5</sup> The American Heart Association commits substantial resources to develop scientific statements, guidelines, policy statements, and original reports based on rigorous, peer-reviewed research, providing a trusted resource for policymakers that reinforces the Association's credibility for its advocacy positions to improve cardiovascular health.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, The American Heart Association is committed to operating in accordance with laws surrounding permissible activities for 501(c)(3) organizations in all of its advocacy activities, including those pertaining to lobbying, candidate education, and other civic engagement activities.

### Background

According to the African American Collaborative Obesity Research Network (AACORN), civic engagement can promote policy changes at the community level through collective efficacy and advance health promotion and equity efforts.<sup>7</sup> However, unequal access to civic engagement opportunities leads to inequitable civic participation—thus, unjust investments, conditions, and outcomes for historically marginalized populations.<sup>8,9</sup> Civic engagement is not only a set of practices but a set of conditions informed by how individuals are positioned in their communities. According to the Health and Democracy Index (2021), states with more voter restrictions have worse public health outcomes than states with fewer restrictions.<sup>10</sup> Expanding civic engagement opportunities empowers the entire community, including underrepresented groups to advocate for policies that respond to community needs and improve health and social outcomes. However, research on the roles of different types of civic engagement (e.g., social and community organizing, grassroots advocacy, voting), how those civic engagement approaches vary by social and demographic context, and how effective strategies are in advancing health equity is needed.<sup>11</sup> Civic engagement strengthens community resilience and improves mental and physical health and overall well-being.<sup>12,13</sup>

Public health organizations can strengthen existing civic participation infrastructure by partnering with organizing groups, centering the voices of community members in coalition decision making, and shifting resources to organizing groups.<sup>14</sup> Influencing public policy through advocacy is an essential strategy for the American Heart

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<sup>1</sup> Section 501(c)(3) is the portion of the US Internal Revenue Code that allows for federal tax exemption of nonprofit organizations, specifically those that are considered public charities, private foundations, or private operating foundations. It is regulated and administered by the US Department of Treasury through the Internal Revenue Service.

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Association to achieve its health impact goals and priorities, with the added benefit of strengthening civic participation of advocates across the country. This work involves engaging the Association's national officers, researchers, volunteer advocates, staff, and the public.

To achieve its goals and priorities, the American Heart Association works across the public policy continuum to influence policy through:

- stakeholder and coalition development,
- policy research and analysis,
- development of comprehensive legislative and regulatory advocacy campaigns,
- media advocacy,
- grassroots strategies, and
- evaluations to assess the impact of laws or regulations.<sup>15</sup>

For over 40 years, volunteers have engaged in the American Heart Association's domestic and global advocacy efforts by testifying before federal and state legislatures, providing technical expertise to regulatory bodies, lobbying federal and state lawmakers, developing policy position statements, engaging in grassroots and media advocacy activities, working in coalition with key international partners, and building a global network of relationships with leading scientists and like-minded organizations.<sup>16,17</sup> The American Heart Association's advocacy presence includes efforts in communities, all 50 states, Washington, DC, and Puerto Rico as well as a number of other countries beyond the United States.<sup>18</sup>

The scope of The American Heart Association's civic engagement work continues to evolve in response to the policy environment, community needs, and the challenges individuals with heart disease and stroke face. Ultimately, The American Heart Association strives to use civic engagement to transform the environments in which people live to promote health, support robust scientific research, improve medical treatment, and advance quality health care.

## Civic Engagement Improves Health Outcomes

There is broad agreement that civic engagement improves individual and population health.<sup>19</sup> Research shows that the relationship between civic engagement and health is mutually reinforcing.<sup>20,21</sup> Healthier people are more likely to be civically engaged, and civic engagement improves participants' health.<sup>22</sup> In 2023, The University of Wisconsin Population Health Institute released a County Health Rankings National Findings report with data, evidence, and guidance on cultivating civic infrastructure and participation for healthier communities.<sup>23</sup>

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Research suggests improvements in health outcomes can occur through a variety of mechanisms. Civic participation can help build social capital, that is, belonging to social networks and the development of social trust that enables people to join together to benefit themselves and the groups to which they belong.<sup>24</sup> People with more social capital have more support to adhere to healthier diets<sup>25</sup> and to be more physically active.<sup>26</sup> Civic engagement can also increase feelings of belonging which can lead to decreased feelings of social isolation and improved psychological health.<sup>27</sup> Volunteering is a particularly effective form of civic engagement for improving both mental and physical health; research suggests it can expand supportive friend networks which can reduce levels of anxiety and depression<sup>28</sup> while simultaneously lowering the risks of cognitive impairment and hypertension.<sup>29,30</sup>

At the community level, civic participation can help groups of people to adopt behaviors.<sup>31,32</sup> Research identifies the impact of using a civic engagement approach to promoting both individual and community behavior change as people who have relationships with one another tend to adopt similar habits.<sup>33</sup> This applies to both unhealthy behaviors as well as healthier behaviors like adhering to healthy lifestyle habits which can be beneficial in reducing the risk of cardiovascular disease.<sup>34,35,36</sup> One study found improvements in dietary intake, physical activity levels, CVD fitness, and blood pressure among African American women who advocated for reduced CVD risk in their community.<sup>37</sup> The Office of Disease Prevention and [Health Promotion](#) (ODPHP) recognizes civic engagement as a measurable driver of individuals and community health by establishing voter participation as a Healthy People 2030 research objective. However, ODPHP could establish voting as a core objective to ensure voter participation will have an identified data source; baseline data will be available; at least one additional data point will be collected throughout the decade; and, evidence-based interventions are available.<sup>38,39</sup>

Furthermore, The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation's (RWJF) Culture of Health action framework identifies civic engagement as an important driver for addressing unhealthy conditions in communities. According to The Culture of Health Progress Report,<sup>40</sup> which assesses RWJF's contributions toward improved population health, well-being, and health equity, organizations should:

- i. Integrate health equity into policies at the federal state and local levels;
- ii. Ensure health becomes a shared value;
  - i. This can be fostered through community engagement which builds trust;
- iii. Facilitate cross-sector collaborations with partners from other fields to foster collaboration, peer support, and evaluation building capacity for systems change;
- iv. Acknowledge residents' health and social needs to create healthier, equitable communities;

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- v. Recognize that standard research practices can challenge disseminating findings promptly;
- vi. Advance Culture of Health locally, which requires agility, flexibility, and creativity.

Recommendations to ensure health becomes a shared value through community engagement. Acknowledging residents' health and social needs is particularly relevant to effective civic engagement efforts.

## Previous Civic Engagement Activities by the American Heart Association

The AHA has demonstrated a steadfast commitment to civic engagement, actively seeking opportunities to collaborate and drive positive change in the pursuit of heart disease prevention and improved cardiovascular well-being. Examples of previous civic engagement activities by the American Heart Association include:

- Take Heart 2004: This Federal initiative focused on including voter education on top issues and questions for candidates;
- Are You Covered Campaign 2007-08: The American Heart Association collaborated with a group of partners to bring attention to the need for people to have access to quality healthcare coverage and to inform individuals about how civic engagement can impact health;
- Ballot initiatives: Efforts included voter education and get-out-the-vote efforts;
- Candidate questions: The American Heart Association provided advocates with sample questions for state candidates, often in collaboration with coalition efforts;
- Voter registration/education: The American Heart Association increased voter registration and voter education on elected officials and candidates through its "You're the Cure website."<sup>41</sup>

## The American Heart Association's Tax-exempt Status:

The American Heart Association is a 501(c)(3) tax-exempt organization and must follow rules affecting the following six areas:

- Private benefit/inurement
- Lobbying
  - a 501(c)(3) organization may lobby—that is, contact or encourage the public to contact members of legislative bodies or their staff to propose, support, or oppose legislation—in a limited fashion.
- Political campaign activity

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- a 501(c)(3) organization may not campaign on behalf of or in opposition to a political candidate.
- Unrelated business income (UBI)
- Annual reporting to the IRS
- Operation in accordance with its stated exempt purpose<sup>42</sup>

Accordingly, 501(c)(3) organizations must carefully tailor their civic engagement and advocacy activities to comply with the law and maintain their tax-exempt status. Notwithstanding these limitations, there is a great deal such organizations can contribute and accomplish. The following includes examples of permissible and impermissible activities for 501(c)(3) organizations related to civic engagement:<sup>2</sup>

Generally permissible 501(c)(3) activities:<sup>43</sup>

- limited lobbying, including work on ballot measures.
  - lobbying must not consume a substantial amount of time, human, or financial resources to be permissible<sup>44</sup>
- advocating for the organization's issues during an election year
- publishing legislative scorecards
  - such scorecards cannot directly advocate for or against a candidate for public office.
- conducting **nonpartisan** get-out-the-vote and voter registration drives.
- canvassing the public on issues
- educating candidates on public interest issues within the purview of the organization
- working with political parties to get organizational positions included on the party's platform.

Activities relating to civic engagement are not permissible for 501(c)(3) organizations to engage in under the law:<sup>45</sup>

- endorsing candidates for office
- making campaign contributions
- publishing materials that explicitly favor or oppose a candidate.
- engaging in issue advocacy when the organization does not have a clearly articulated non-electoral reason to do so.
- comparing an organization's issue position with that of a candidate for office
- comparing candidates on issues of importance to the organization when their views diverge

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<sup>2</sup> This list is not a substitute for tailored legal, tax, or other expert advice and may not help organizations avoid penalties until the Internal Revenue Code.

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- asking candidates to sign pledges on issues.

### Gaps and Opportunities for Civic Engagement

Despite the promising opportunities that civic engagement offers for advancing cardiovascular disease prevention and well-being, more could be done to effectively leverage civic engagement to advance AHA's mission. More research defining the relationship between civic engagement and health would be beneficial, in particular the types of civic engagement that are most beneficial for overall health and well-being. For types of civic engagement that do have evidence supporting their efficacy in improving health, increased efforts to promote such engagement would be impactful. Ultimately, The American Heart Association sees civic engagement as an opportunity to empower communities, create equitable public policy, build and strengthen collaborations internally and externally and promote health and well-being.

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