



BOSTON COLLEGE
CENTER FOR CORPORATE CITIZENSHIP
CARROLL SCHOOL OF MANAGEMENT

Health Equity Advisory Board



TABLE OF CONTENTS

1	Letter From the Chair
3	Introduction
5	Meet the Contributors
6	Health Inequities: The Role of Commercial Determinants of Health
9	Pharma Integrates Health Equity Into Core Business
12	Mobilizing Community Health Workers to Reach Vulnerable Communities
13	Insurers Forge Partnerships to Promote Health Equity
15	Shared Responsibility: Mobilizing Industries to Tackle Health Inequities
19	A Silent Epidemic: Confronting Eating Disorders
20	The Punchlist
21	A Move From Health Equity to Health Justice
22	References

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Letter From the Chair

If it is true that a chain is only as strong as its weakest link, isn't it also true a society is only as healthy as its sickest citizen and only as wealthy as its most deprived?"

–Maya Angelou, “Even the Stars Look Lonesome”

Dear Fellow Corporate Leaders,

As the Chair of the Health Equity BCCCC Advisory Board, I am writing to you today to emphasize the paramount importance of health equity and health justice in our society. It is our collective responsibility as business leaders to prioritize these critical issues and take meaningful action to address the disparities that persist in our society.

Health equity is the principle that everyone should have a fair and just opportunity to attain their highest level of health, regardless of their race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, or any other social determinant. Unfortunately, systemic inequalities have led to significant disparities in health outcomes, with marginalized communities often bearing the brunt of these inequities. This is not only a moral imperative but also a business imperative, as a healthier workforce contributes to increased productivity, reduced health care costs, and overall economic growth.

Moreover, investing in community health is essential for both business success and community cohesion. When communities are healthy and thriving, businesses benefit from a more stable and prosperous operating context. Healthy communities foster a sense of belonging, trust, and collaboration, which are vital for building strong relationships between businesses and the communities they serve. By prioritizing community health, companies can contribute to creating vibrant, resilient communities that support their long-term success.



CHRISTY REEVES

Vice President,
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Health justice, on the other hand, recognizes that achieving health equity requires addressing the root causes of these disparities, including social, economic, and environmental factors. It calls for the active dismantling of oppressive systems and the promotion of policies and practices that prioritize the health and well-being of all individuals, particularly those who have been historically marginalized. Business leaders from ALL industries have a voice on these matters and a role to play in resolving them.

By prioritizing health equity and health justice, we not only fulfill our moral obligation to create a more just and equitable society but also position our companies for long-term success. This advisory bulletin is intended to provide helpful information and food for thought about how you might address these important issues. I urge you to join us in this critical mission and take concrete steps to embed these principles into your corporate strategies and practices.

Together, we can build a future where everyone has the opportunity to live a healthy and fulfilling life.

Sincerely,

CHRISTY REEVES

Chair, Advisory Board on Health Equity
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Introduction

Health inequities have emerged as one of the most pressing challenges faced by societies worldwide. The COVID-19 pandemic brought these disparities into sharp focus, highlighting the disproportionate impact on marginalized and underserved communities. Health inequities are systematic differences in health outcomes and well-being across various populations, often stemming from social, economic, and environmental disadvantages. These disparities are not only morally unjust but also pose significant challenges to the overall health and productivity of communities.

Data on health outcomes reveal striking disparities based on factors such as income, race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, physical and mental abilities, and geography. For example, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has identified 23 Leading Health Indicators, with all but one showing a race and ethnicity disparity.¹ Life expectancy and the number of years a person can expect to live in good health also vary significantly across different demographic groups. Non-Hispanic African Americans face the worst outcomes, with an overall life expectancy of 74.9 years and only 63.4 of those years spent in good health.²

The root causes of health inequities are complex and multifaceted, and often linked to social determinants of health. These underlying nonmedical factors include education, economic stability, health care access and quality, social and community context, and the built environment. Disparities in access to quality education, stable income, safe housing, and affordable and nutritious food contribute to the widening gap in health outcomes. Moreover, historical and contemporary injustices, such as redlining practices that have led to worse air pollution in predominantly African American neighborhoods, further perpetuate these inequities.

Addressing health inequities is not only a moral imperative but also a critical economic concern. Health inequities cost the U.S. economy an estimated \$320 billion per year in lost productivity and health care costs, with projections suggesting this figure could rise to \$1 trillion annually by 2040 if left unaddressed.³ As corporations increasingly recognize their role in shaping the social, economic, and environmental

factors that influence health outcomes, it becomes crucial to examine the complex interplay between corporate practices and population health. By understanding the business case for health equity and the various levers they can pull to promote change, companies across all sectors can contribute to creating a more equitable and healthier future for all.



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Health Inequities: The Role of Commercial Determinants of Health

The social determinants of health are the conditions in which people grow, live, and work, along with the systems put in place to deal with illness and the wider set of forces and systems shaping the conditions of life. Commercial determinants of health are a key social determinant and refer to the conditions, actions, and omissions by commercial actors that affect health.⁴ This framework highlights the central role of companies in shaping health outcomes and recognizing their influence on various aspects of health, such as access to health care, nutrition, environmental conditions, and social determinants. By acknowledging their impact, companies can develop targeted strategies to mitigate negative health consequences and contribute to the well-being of the communities they serve.

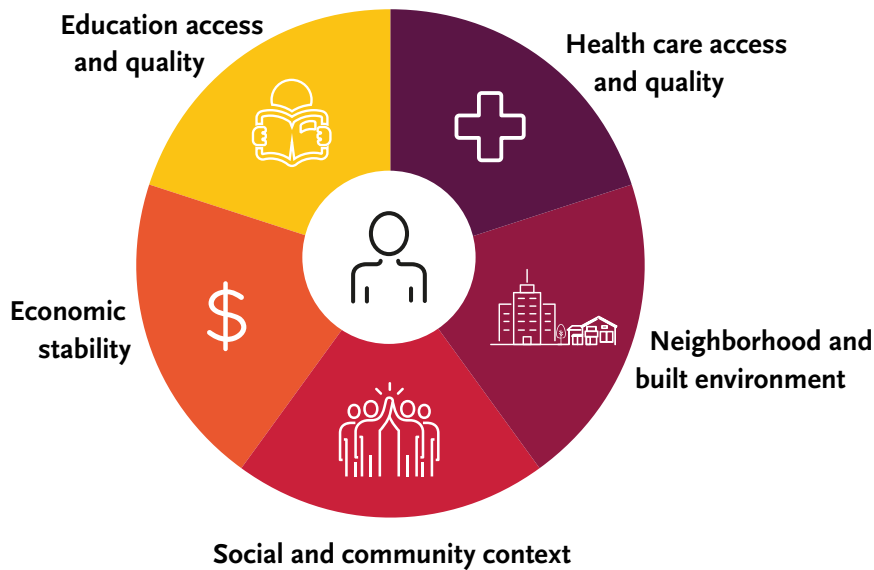
ADVICE FROM THE BOARD

Health outcomes are determined not only by access to and quality of health care. More health outcomes are linked to non-medical drivers of health—social, economic, and environmental factors like food security, safe housing, employment opportunities, and education—than not.

For companies eager to increase their trust among stakeholders, evidence suggests that exclusively depending on philanthropic and other voluntary solutions may not yield the desired results. Because of the voluntary nature of this approach, investments are often variable depending on the discretionary availability of resources that are based on firms' financial performance. Without steady and ongoing commitment of resources, results can sometimes become fragmented and insufficient. Tackling health disparities necessitates a concerted, multisectoral response involving gov-

ernment, civil society, and the private sector. Simply trusting in the altruism of individual companies may not produce the wide-ranging and long-term measures

SOCIAL DETERMINANTS OF HEALTH



Source: Office of Disease Prevention and Health Promotion. *Healthy People 2030: Social Determinants of Health*. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

needed to address the underlying causes of health inequities.

To effectively address health inequities, companies must embrace data-driven strategies. These approaches enable companies to identify specific health disparities within their communities, understand the underlying factors contributing to these inequities, and develop targeted interventions. By leveraging data, companies can prioritize their efforts, allocate resources effectively, and more accurately measure the impact of their initiatives over time.

One key recommendation for companies is to assess where they can make a difference on reducing disparity in social indicators of health by incorporating an assessment of the commercial determinants of health framework into their environmental, social, and governance (ESG) strategies. This involves assessing context, operations, products, and practices through a health equity lens and identifying areas where they can make a positive impact. By aligning their business strategies with the goal of promoting health equity, companies can contribute to the well-being of the communities they serve while enhancing outcomes and long-term sustainability of positive results.⁵



Collaboration among various stakeholders is crucial in addressing health inequities. The Boston College Center for Corporate Citizenship emphasizes the importance of multi-stakeholder partnerships in developing comprehensive and coordinated strategies. By pooling resources, expertise, and data, stakeholders can collectively work toward reducing health disparities and promoting equitable health outcomes. Companies should actively engage with government agencies, health care providers, community organizations, and other companies to drive meaningful change.

Through concerted efforts and a commitment to social responsibility, companies have the power to drive positive change and create a more equitable and healthier future for all. By addressing health inequities, companies can not only contribute to the well-being of their employees, customers, and communities, but also enhance their long-term business sustainability and resilience. It is time for companies to take action, leverage their resources and expertise, and work collaboratively to build a world where everyone has an equal opportunity to achieve their full health potential.


Pharma Integrates Health Equity Into Core Business

Health inequities persist globally, with disadvantaged populations facing disproportionate barriers in accessing essential medicines and health care. By integrating health equity into their ESG strategies, pharmaceutical companies can have a meaningful impact as they play a crucial role in bridging these gaps.

A key takeaway is the importance of aligning core business goals with ESG priorities. Therefore, improving access and equity is embedded into the overall corporate strategy, not siloed as a separate philanthropic effort. ESG activities and goals are embedded into the corporate scorecard and tied to incentives, signaling its priority to the entire organization. This positions companies to set goals to increase their products' reach, facilitate access to innovative medicines through their programs, and specify that a portion of their programs will be dedicated to people in low-income and underserved populations. This comprehensive approach ensures that equity considerations are woven into decision-making across the value chain from R&D to pricing and distribution.

Companies are also demonstrating the business case for their mental health initiatives in partnership with global health nonprofits. For example, by preventing and treating mental health conditions, they can aim to reduce the incidence of substance use disorders and overdoses. This shows how targeted ESG programs can address an important societal need while mitigating risks relevant to their business. When companies can quantify the impact of their equity initiatives on both public health outcomes and their bottom line, this strengthens both the internal rationale for investment and the external narrative about the private sector's role in advancing equity.

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Health equity is reached when all people—irrespective of where they live, their race or ethnicity, or their socio-economic status—can reach their full potential for health and wellbeing. To achieve the desired health outcome, it is important to understand the barriers.

Companies are increasingly recognizing the untapped potential of their employees in amplifying health equity efforts. Many are moving beyond traditional corporate social responsibility (CSR) programs to offer more immersive and skill-based volunteering opportunities (e.g., by enabling employees to work directly in underserved communities, applying their scientific, technical, and business expertise to address local health challenges). Partnering with community organizations and social enterprises creates opportunities for employees to learn firsthand about the realities of health inequity and co-develop solutions grounded in local needs.

Integrating health equity into employee engagement strategies not only boosts the impact of ESG initiatives but also enhances employee satisfaction, retention, and

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By investing in employees and local underserved communities, every company can help positively influence population health outcomes. It will take the collaboration of all industries and sectors—public, private, and nonprofit—working together to address systemic issues, reduce disparities, and advance health equity.

productivity. Offering incentives and recognition for volunteering—such as paid time off, matching donations, or leadership opportunities—can further drive participation and impact. Moreover, employee resource groups (ERGs) focused on health equity and diversity can play a valuable role in fostering a culture of inclusion and social responsibility. These grassroots, employee-led groups provide a platform for raising awareness about health disparities, advocating for change within the organization, and collaborating with external partners. ERGs can also serve as a sounding board for ESG strategies, ensuring that initia-

tives are informed by diverse perspectives and lived experiences.

Strategic partnerships are essential for pharmaceutical companies to maximize their reach and impact. No single organization has the resources or expertise to tackle the complex challenges of health inequity alone. Collaboration allows companies to leverage complementary strengths, share risks and costs, and achieve scale more quickly.

In expanding access to vaccines, pharma companies often partner with global health agencies to reach lower-income countries with high disease burden at affordable prices. By working with trusted intermediaries like Gavi and UNICEF, companies can navigate complex political and logistical barriers to ensure vaccines reach the most vulnerable populations. This type of partnership also lends credibility and

legitimacy to global health efforts, countering potential skepticism about the private sector's motivations.

Pharma firms rely on collaboration with global health nonprofits to leverage the NGOs' deep expertise in mental health and extensive networks in low- and middle-income countries. By jointly designing and implementing community-based mental health programs, they can ensure that interventions are culturally appropriate, locally owned, and sustainable over time. Nonprofit partners also bring valuable monitoring and evaluation capabilities to measure initiatives' impact and generate learnings for continuous improvement.

Examples from the pharma industry illustrate how integrating health equity into core ESG strategies can yield both business and societal value no matter the industry you are in. By aligning equity goals with corporate priorities, engaging employees as changemakers, and forging strategic partnerships, all companies can make meaningful contributions to reducing health disparities while also enhancing their competitiveness and resilience.



Mobilizing Community Health Workers to Reach Vulnerable Communities

Community health workers (CHWs) are a highly effective segment of the public health workforce, and yet the lowest paid. Mostly women of color, they dedicate their lives to improving the health of their neighbors, champion equity and social justice, and strive to build healthier communities nationwide—one person at a time.

When multinational healthcare and pharma company Sanofi wanted to better understand and support the CHW workforce in the U.S., it forged a partnership with the National Association of Community Health Workers (NACHW) to invest funds and talent into the creation of the CHWConnector—the first national digital platform for CHWs, which will launch in June 2024.

In collaboration with NACHW, nearly 2,000 Sanofi employees embarked on a listening journey that fostered much-needed trust and put the voices of CHWs at the center of the CHWConnector design process. This involved uniting CHWs from different states, many of whom were distrustful of participating in a national registry. As part of this initiative:

- 200 Sanofi employees supported the design of the CHWConnector digital platform.
- 75 CHWs were awarded Sanofi-supported scholarships to attend policy training in Washington, D.C., and subsequently held 117 legislative meetings on “Hill Day” in March 2024 to gain support for the newly introduced CHW Access Act that supports CHW reimbursement.

Sanofi’s All In for Community Health Workers initiative has brought long-term funding and accelerated capacity-building to NACHW’s mission to unify and support the CHW workforce and its policy platform across all 50 states, supporting powerful strategic engagement of NACHW stakeholders across sectors. Importantly, the initiative is an ongoing exercise in humility and listening for Sanofi that respects and supports CHWs’ self-determination and places CHWs at the center of designing the CHWConnector platform.

Insurers Forge Partnerships to Promote Health Equity

Health insurance companies are uniquely positioned to understand the systemic nature of health outcomes, as they witness firsthand how various factors beyond medical care influence the well-being of their members. Recognizing that addressing health inequities requires a collaborative approach, these companies are increasingly focusing on building community-rooted partnerships to drive change. By forging relationships with local organizations, health care providers, government agencies, and academic institutions, health insurance providers can work toward creating a more equitable health care landscape.

One key area where partnerships are essential is addressing the social determinants of health. Partnerships between health insurance companies and community-based organizations that have deep roots in the communities they serve allow for a tailored approach to tackling health disparities, as local organizations have a keen understanding of the unique challenges faced by their constituents. For example, one insurance company partnered with a local nonprofit to develop a program that connects individuals with community resources, such as housing assistance and food banks, in recognition of the fact that these factors play a significant role in health outcomes.

In addition to partnerships with community organizations, health insurance companies work closely with providers to identify and address disparities in care, recognizing that achieving health equity requires a concerted effort from all stakeholders within the health care system. These partnerships involve providing financial incentives for reducing

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By recognizing the systemic inequities inherent in their communities and then using their unique leverage to reduce those barriers to well-being. From partnerships to programs to philanthropic investment, all companies can find ways to support health care that fit their unique skills.

health disparities and offering technical assistance to help providers improve their practices. For example, one insurance company established a program that offers enhanced reimbursement rates to providers who demonstrate a commitment to reducing racial and ethnic disparities in care. Another initiative involves working with primary care practices to implement culturally competent care models and improve access to preventive services for underserved populations. By aligning incentives and providing support to health care providers, insurance companies can drive systemic change toward more equitable care delivery.

Collaboration with government agencies is another crucial aspect of addressing systemic health inequities. Companies have actively engaged with public health departments and other government entities to address the broader social and economic factors that influence health. These partnerships have led to initiatives focusing on issues such as housing stability, food security, and transportation access. By working hand in hand with government agencies, health insurance companies can contribute to the development of policies and programs that promote health equity on a larger scale.

Academic institutions also play a vital role in the fight against health inequity. Partnerships with universities and research organizations allow health insurance companies to stay informed about the latest findings in health equity research and best practices. These collaborations can help evaluate the effectiveness of initiatives aimed at reducing disparities and identify areas for improvement. Moreover, working with academic institutions can foster the development of innovative solutions to complex health equity challenges.

The experiences of health care insurance companies underscore the importance of community partnerships in addressing systemic health inequities. Through various partnerships, these companies can tackle the complex factors that influence health outcomes and work toward creating a more equitable future. Building trust and making long-term commitments to the communities they serve are essential components of successful collaboration. As the health care industry continues to evolve, fostering strong community relationships will be a critical strategy for reducing health disparities.

Shared Responsibility: Mobilizing Industries to Tackle Health Inequities

While the health care industry is on the front lines of promoting health and treating disease, many other sectors also have an immense impact on the social, economic, and environmental factors that heavily influence population health and health equity. The recent 2024 BCCCC State of Corporate Citizenship Report shows that companies across industries are increasingly prioritizing diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives, along with employee health and wellness and sustainability efforts like greenhouse gas reduction. These priorities create opportunities for cross-sector collaboration to address root causes of health disparities.

For example, the finance industry identified DEI, employee health and wellness, and sustainability among its top social issues. Financial companies can promote health equity by increasing access to affordable financial services and homeownership in underserved communities, and by financing community development projects that create healthier living environments. The 2024 State of Corporate Citizenship Report also found that 61% of financial companies participate in organizations to help achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) such as Zero Hunger, Good Health and Wellbeing, Clean Water and Sanitation, and Reduced Inequalities. Seeing as the SDGs are significantly interconnected with health equity, corporate participation in achieving these goals can contribute significantly to improving health equity globally.⁶

The energy and utilities sectors highlighted reducing emissions, improving air and water quality, and supporting local communities as key priorities. Pollution and climate change disproportionately harm the health of disadvantaged populations. By transitioning to clean energy, these industries can mitigate environmental health risks that exacerbate inequities. They can also ensure equitable access to affordable,

reliable utilities.

In the technology industry, bridging the digital divide emerged as an area of focus. Lack of access to telehealth, online health resources, and critical social services perpetuates health disparities. Technology companies can advance digital equity through affordable internet access, digital literacy programs, and developing inclusive and ethical AI and digital health tools.

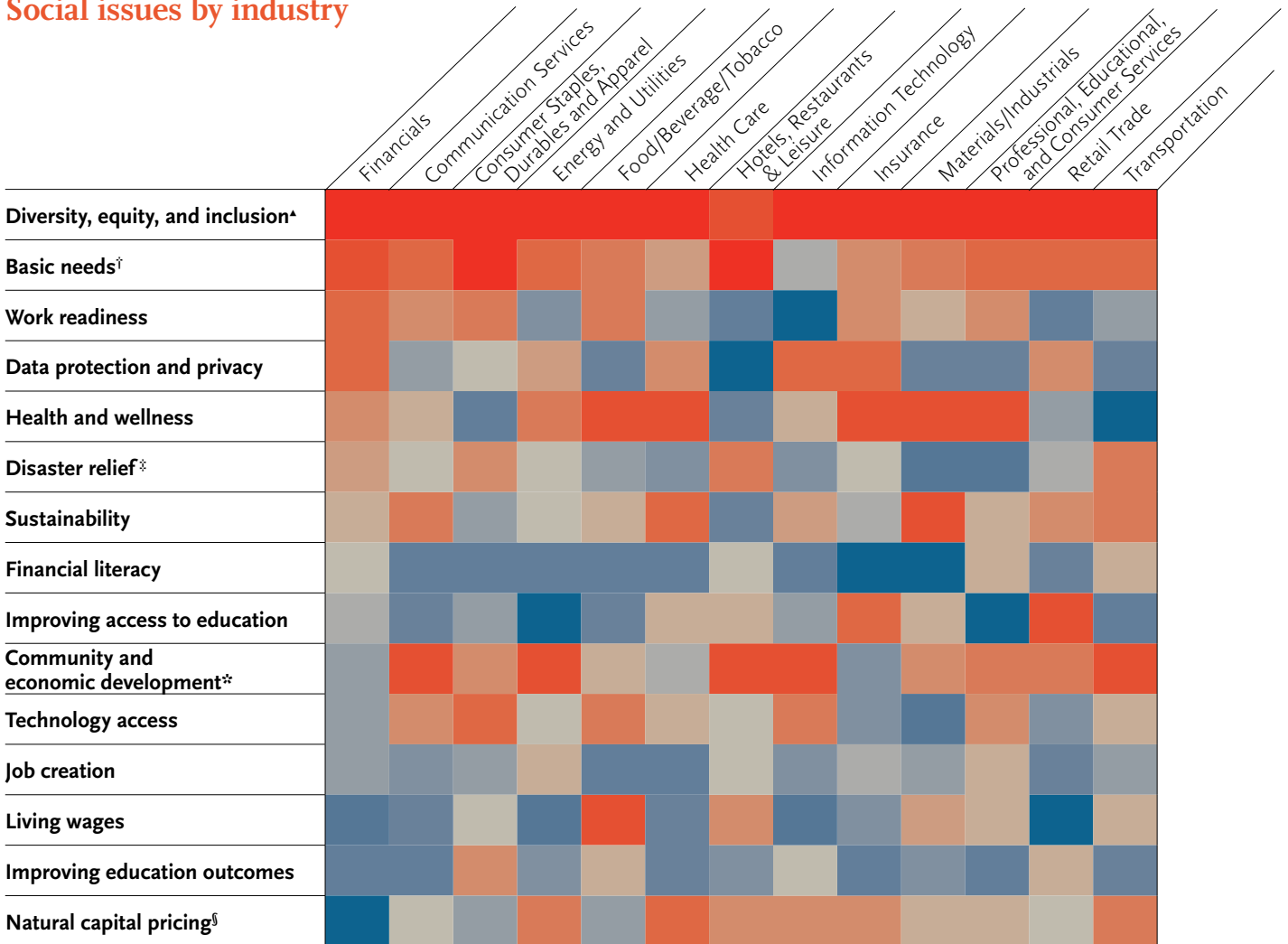
Professional services firms, such as consulting, legal, and accounting companies, can leverage their expertise and resources to support health equity initiatives. These firms can provide pro bono services to nonprofit organizations and community health centers that help these organizations expand their reach and impact. Firms in this sector can also use their influence to advocate for policies that address social determinants of health and promote equitable access to health care and other essential services.

As for other sectors, the food and beverage industry can increase availability of nutritious and affordable food in underserved areas, while the transportation sector can facilitate access to health care, jobs, education, and other health-promoting resources by expanding affordable and reliable public transit options in transit deserts. Businesses across the board can look at their hiring practices, wage scales, benefits, and working conditions to ensure they are promoting the health and economic mobility of their diverse workforce.

As the 2024 State of Corporate Citizenship Report shows, companies in the private sector share responsibility for the social, economic, and environmental conditions that shape health.



Social issues by industry



Highest agreement Within each industry, corporate citizenship professionals were asked to identify their highest and lowest corporate citizenship priorities. Issues that received majority prioritization are red, while those that were prioritized in the middle are blue and by the fewest number of respondents are gray.

Mid agreement

Lowest agreement

▲ Includes racial justice and gender equality

† Includes food and shelter

‡ Includes preparation, response, and recovery

* Includes small businesses and entrepreneurship

§ e.g., carbon market

Source: Boston College Center for Corporate Citizenship. (2024). *The State of Corporate Citizenship 2024*

Health care companies cannot achieve health equity alone. Breaking down silos between industries to align DEI, employee wellness, and sustainability strategies with health equity goals will be critical to meaningfully moving the needle. Corporate citizenship professionals are well-positioned to facilitate these cross-sector partnerships to build healthier communities.

ADVICE FROM THE BOARD



Health happens where we live, work and play—not just in health care settings—so all of us can take steps to eliminate the inequities that contribute to health disparities. Corporate decisions shape our communities, from environmental sustainability practices and product pricing to wage equity and DEI policies. Corporations in all sectors can make meaningful changes for healthier lives for everyone.

Companies are made up of people.

The physical, mental, social, and economic health and well-being of all employees and their families can impact engagement and productivity in the workplace and the ability to contribute to the broader community. Through benefits that support healthy living, promote disease prevention, and foster more equitable outcomes for all employees, every company can help support health equity.

Health is more than what happens inside a doctor's office.

Health equity is a framework of thought and action that strives to reduce racial and socioeconomic disparities and create fair and just opportunities for every person to reach their full potential for health and life and contribute to that of others. We believe that advancing health equity means supporting efforts to improve living conditions that cause people to be sick in the first place. That's where all companies, even those outside of a “traditional health care environment,” can find a role to play as we look further upstream at the root causes of what causes systemic inequities for low-income individuals and families.

A Silent Epidemic: Confronting Eating Disorders

Eating disorders affect nearly 30 million Americans, or 9% of the population, at some point in their lives.⁷ These complex mental health conditions have far-reaching consequences that extend beyond the individual, impacting society.

Research reveals that people with eating disorders have one of the highest mortality rates among individuals with mental health conditions, at an estimate of more than 10,000 deaths annually in the U.S. Death by suicide is a significant contributor, with those experiencing eating disorder symptoms being 11 times more likely to attempt suicide than their peers.⁸

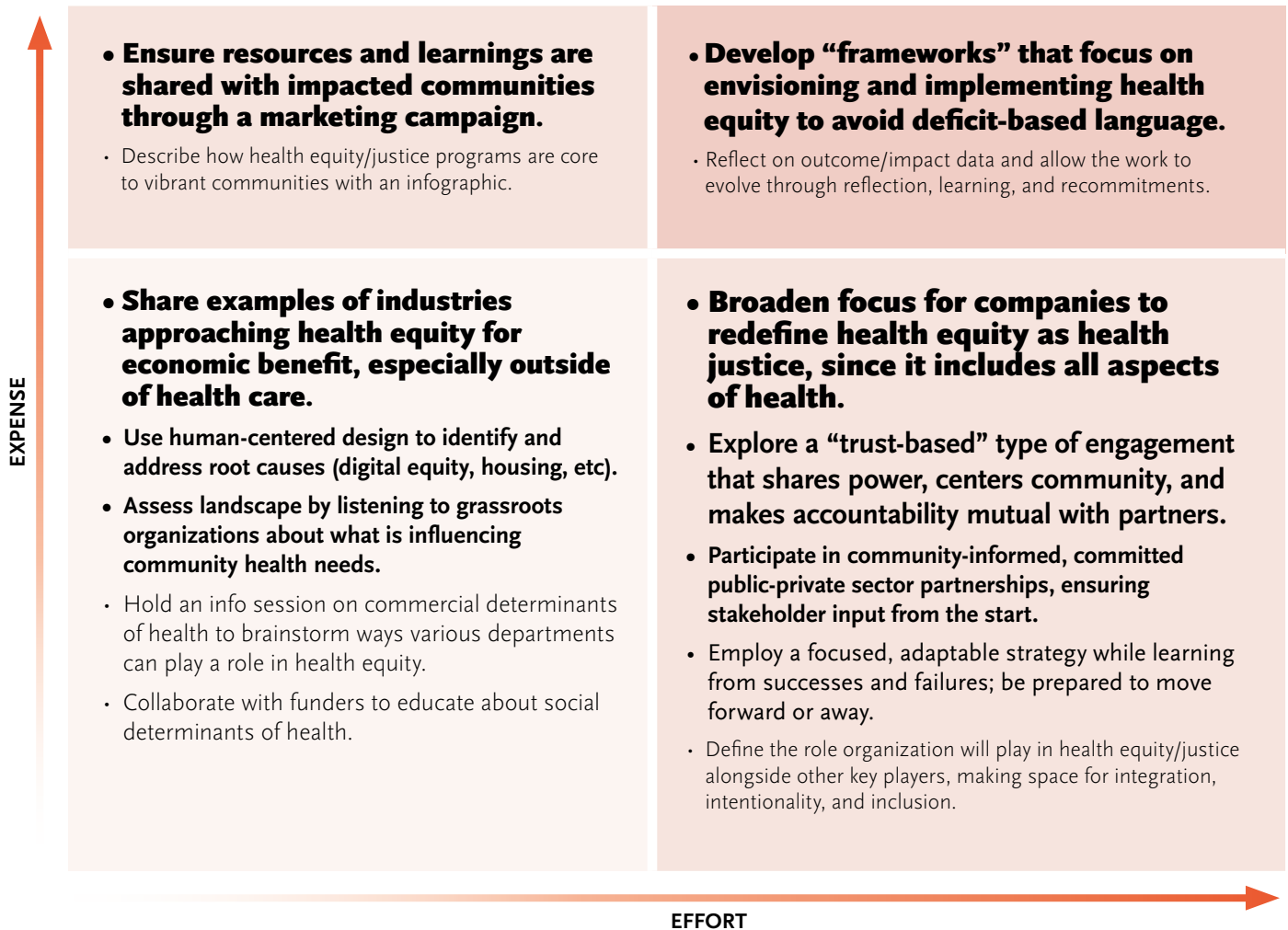
The economic impact of eating disorders is staggering, costing the U.S. economy \$64.7 billion annually. Productivity losses account for most of these costs at \$48.6 billion, with employers bearing a substantial portion of the expense. For example, individuals with anorexia nervosa and bulimia nervosa are estimated to miss an additional 27 days of work per year compared to the average employee.⁹

The COVID-19 pandemic has only exacerbated the situation, with a two- to three-times-higher caseload for eating disorders observed in children's hospitals nationwide. Despite this, a mere 20% of affected individuals receive treatment, highlighting vast inequities in access to care that are particularly prominent among marginalized communities.¹⁰

ESG professionals have a unique opportunity to contribute to the fight against eating disorders and their consequences. Consider partnering with community organizations and schools to implement evidence-based prevention and early intervention programs, and advocate for policies that address the social determinants of health that can lead to eating disorders—such as food insecurity and affordable, culturally competent care. Within your own organization, foster a culture of inclusivity and ensure that your employee wellness initiatives do not inadvertently perpetuate eating disorder behavior or weight stigma. Together, we can create a world where all those affected by eating disorders receive the care they need to thrive.

The Punchlist

Whether you have little time in your schedule or money in your budget for health equity initiatives or a lot of both, there is something you can be doing today to make progress toward your health equity goals. Here are recommendations from Advisory Board members about things you can get started on today. Bolder and larger font indicates those actions prioritized by greater numbers of advisory board members.



A MOVE FROM HEALTH EQUITY TO HEALTH JUSTICE

As the work for equitable health care access continues, a shift in terminology from “health equity” to “health justice” has been discussed. This change reflects a broader understanding of the social and commercial determinants of health and the systemic barriers that perpetuate inequities. “Health justice” valuably encompasses the interconnected nature of health with climate and social justice, addressing the root causes of inequity. By focusing on health justice, we acknowledge the role of racism and other forms of discrimination in shaping health outcomes. Embracing health justice is not just a change in language; it is a commitment to dismantling the structures that have long perpetuated health disparities and creating a more equitable and just society.



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Build your network Advance your ideas

Are you a CSR professional looking to share your expertise and advice with others while staying current on emerging issues and leading-edge practices related to your work? Explore the benefits of serving on a BCCCC Advisory Board! The boards are available only to Center members and give you an instant ability to tap into new strategies with your peers. It's also a great way to keep you energized and in the know; these supportive networks will help advance your ideas and keep you motivated.

Benefits of Serving on a BCCCC Advisory Board

COLLABORATION

Looking for new strategies? Want to hear about the experiences of other companies? Participating in an advisory board will give you access to an exclusive cohort of peers and professionals where you can discuss and share best practices.

CHOICES

BCCCC offers a multitude of advisory boards that focus on several areas that may impact your company including ESG Reporting; Community Involvement; Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion; Health Equity; and Sustainability

CREDIBILITY

Stepping up on a bigger platform with recognition from outside of your company gives you a platform to both showcase and build your CSR efforts.

COMMUNICATION

Board members are invited to be named as co-authors of the one or more briefing publications that their advisory boards release every year.





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KNOW MORE. DO MORE. ACHIEVE MORE.

Based in the **Carroll School of Management**, the Boston College Center for Corporate Citizenship combines the most valuable aspects of a professional community and the resources of a leading academic institution for our members. We integrate the perspectives and experience of some of the leading corporate citizenship professionals in the field today with management best practices, helping you align your corporate citizenship objectives and business goals. Center resources support positive outcomes for your functional area, your organization as a whole, and you as a leader.

ccc.bc.edu

