



Healthy Democracy Healthy People Initiative

Jeanne Ayers, Executive Director

45 W 36th St. 6th floor, New York, NY 10018

September 19, 2022

The Honorable Xavier Becerra
Secretary
U.S. Department of Health and Human Services
200 Independence Ave, SW
Washington, DC 20201

Dear Secretary Becerra,

As leaders in the public health, healthcare, and civic engagement sectors, we commend the Biden Administration for the issuance of the President's Executive Order 14019: *Promoting Access to Voting* and extend our gratitude for your continued efforts to promote civic and voter participation. Members of Healthy Democracy Healthy People (HDHP) are unified around the understanding that when more people are engaged in the democratic process, people and communities are healthier. HDHP is a nonpartisan coalition of major public health and civic engagement groups formed for the purpose of advancing health equity by strengthening civic and voter participation. We are writing to express our appreciation for the actions you have taken at the federal level to date such as the recent commitment by the Office of Disease Prevention and Health Promotion to include voting as a Research Objective in the Healthy People 2030 objectives to improve health and wellbeing.

Beyond the Executive Order and regardless of Administration, there are compelling reasons for the Department of Health and Human Services to be actively involved in increasing civic engagement, especially as one of the largest federal agencies that directly touches Americans' lives. First and foremost, doing so will help the agency fulfill its core mission of "enhance[ing] the health and well-being of all Americans." Research has shown that civic and voter participation is strongly associated with health disparities: states and countries that have more accessible voting policies and higher levels of civic participation are healthier across multiple public health measures.¹ The social determinants of health, the conditions in which we live, work, pray and age, account for 30-50% of health outcomes.² Improving health disparities can only be achieved by fully addressing the social and political determinants of health, including civic and voter participation. Additionally, under the National Voter Registration Act of 1993, state public assistance agencies including Medicaid and other programs must offer voter registration opportunities and assistance to all individuals applying for benefits or benefit renewal.³ This law knows the reach and potential of public assistance programs to close the United States' historic and lingering gaps in voter registration, an ongoing source of inequity in civic participation.

¹ Nelson C, Sloan J, Chandra A. Examining Civic Engagement Links to Health: Findings from the Literature and Implications for a Culture of Health. RAND Corporation; 2019.

² Social Determinants of Health. World Health Organization. Available at: https://www.who.int/health-topics/social-determinants-of-health#tab=tab_1. Accessed August 12, 2022.

³ United States, Congress, NATIONAL VOTER REGISTRATION ACT. 1973. 74 FR 37520



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We are offering three recommendations of actions the Department of Health and Human Services can take to strengthen civic and voter participation and advance health and racial equity. The attached addendum includes context and data related to these recommendations.

Recommendations:

1. Establish “Increase the proportion of the voting-age citizens who vote – SDOH-R02” as a core, or measurable, objective within Healthy People 2030 and support voting metric development, collection and analysis.
2. Offer clear and specific guidance on what HHS agencies and organizations receiving federal HHS funding can do to promote civic and voter participation.
3. Provide a public update and host a listening session on how HHS is responding to and working to align their programs with the President’s Executive Order from March 2021.

Thank you for your attention and commitment to advancing access to voting, strengthening civic participation, and building an inclusive representative democracy to improve health and well-being overall.

Sincerely,

Healthy Democracy Healthy People Coalition

Coalition Signatories:

American Public Health Association (APHA)
Association of Schools and Programs of Public Health (ASPPH)
Big Cities Health Coalition (BCHC)
Society For Public Health Education (SOPHE)
National Network of Public Health Institutes (NNPHI)
The American College of Preventive Medicine (ACPM)
Alliance for Youth Action
AltaMed Health Services, Los Angeles and Orange Counties, California
Association of the Clinicians for the Underserved (ACU)
Civic Health Alliance

Fair Count
Future Coalition
HealthPartners Institute
Human Impact Partners
Minnesota Public Health Association
Nancy A Humphreys Institute for Political Social Work, University of Connecticut School of Social Work
National Social Work Voter Mobilization Campaign
NursesWhoVote
Patient Voting
Satcher Health Leadership Institute at the Morehouse School of Medicine
The New York Academy of Medicine
Twin Cities Medical Society
Vot-ER & Civic Health Month



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Context and Evidence Supporting Recommendations

Formalize voting within Healthy People 2030 by establishing a Core Objective and supporting voting metric development, collection and analysis.

The national Healthy People initiative is a roadmap for achieving national-level health goals over 10 year spans. Measuring and tracking these goals deeply informs local and state-level health plans, through governments and health care systems. Healthy People 2020 included metrics on the percent of the eligible population that is registered to vote and the percent of registered voters who cast a ballot.⁴ In fact, the relationship between voting and health was recognized by Healthy People 2020 in a report on civic participation as a key issue within the Social Determinants of Health topics.⁵ We understand that the transition from Healthy People 2020 to 2030 came with recommendations to streamline the objectives and measures, and as a consequence, voting metrics as a key indicator of upstream determinants of health and equity were not included.

We are pleased to learn of the recent commitment by ODPHP to include voting as a Research Objective in Healthy People 2030 and want to encourage rapid adoption of civic participation metrics, such as voter participation and registration rates, as Core Objectives. A growing body of evidence supports this aim. An analysis driven by the Healthy Democracy Healthy People initiative in 2021 illustrates that policies granting greater access to the ballot are positively associated with community health indicators.⁶ States with more inclusive voting policies and greater levels of civic participation are healthier according to 12 public health indicators (self rated mental and physical health, percent of adults receiving disability benefits, infant mortality, etc).⁷

In 2019, The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and the Rand Corporation published a scoping review of 64 studies relevant to how voting as a measure of civic engagement is related to health or well-being. The report found that there is a consistent association between voting and health. Self-rated health was consistently positively associated with higher likelihood of voter participation.⁸ Unfortunately, barriers to voter participation are unevenly imposed in the United States, with lower voter registration rates among both

⁴ Healthypeople.gov. 2022. *Social Determinants of Health | Healthy People 2020*. [online] Available at: <<https://www.healthypeople.gov/2020/topics-objectives/topic/social-determinants-health/interventions-resources>> [Accessed 18 July 2022].

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Democracyindex.hdhp.us. 2021. *Health & Democracy Index*. [online] Available at: <<https://democracyindex.hdhp.us/>> [Accessed 18 July 2022].

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Nelson C, Sloan J, Chandra A. Examining Civic Engagement Links to Health: Findings from the Literature and Implications for a Culture of Health. RAND Corporation; 2019.



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communities of color⁹ and teenagers.¹⁰ Latinos, Asian Americans, Americans with lower incomes and education levels, and younger Americans all vote at lower rates than their counterparts.¹¹

Finally, beyond the use of Research and Core Objectives in Healthy People 2030, Leading Health Indicators (LHI) and Overall Health and Well-Being Measures (OHMs) reflect the importance of subjective well-being, life expectancy, disability, and self-perceived health status. To reach the Healthy People 2030 vision of equitable health and well-being, upstream determinants that address root causes of health inequities and collective health such as civic and voter participation must also ultimately be included and measured as LHIs.¹²

Offer clear and specific guidance on what HHS agencies and organizations receiving federal HHS funding can do to promote civic and voter participation

HHS should offer further guidance and encouragement on what HHS agencies directly serving the public and organizations that receive federal funding— including health and human service initiatives— can do to promote civic and voter participation. In March 2022, the Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA) issued guidance on how health centers are able to participate in non-partisan voter registration efforts without hindering the efforts of the Health Center Program project. Under HRSA guidance, Federally Qualified Health Centers are able to engage in activities such as:

“...making available voter registration materials to patients, encouraging patients to register to vote, assisting patients with completing registration forms, sending completed forms to the election authorities, providing voter registration materials in waiting rooms, and allowing private, non-partisan organizations to conduct on-site voter registration.”⁴

We commend the efforts from HHS to issue guidance for Federally Qualified Health Centers’ ability to engage in voter registration activities, and we encourage the agency to offer further guidance that extends to more programs and partnerships within HHS. Under the National Voter Registration Act of 1993, state public

⁹ “Voting and Voter Registration as a Share of the Voter Population, by Race/Ethnicity.” *KFF*, Kaiser Family Foundation, 4 June 2021, <https://www.kff.org/other/state-indicator/voting-and-voter-registration-as-a-share-of-the-voter-population-by-raceethnicity/?currentTimeframe=0&sortModel=%7B%22colId%22%3A%22Location%22%2C%22sort%22%3A%22asc%22%7D>.

¹⁰ Brill, Laura W., et al. “Low Voter Registration Rates among Teens Threaten to Depress Youth Voter Turnout in 2022 Midterm Elections.” *The Civics Center*, The Civics Center, 7 Apr. 2022, <https://thecivicscenter.org/blog/2021/12/15/research-report-low-voter-registration-rates-among-teens-threaten-to-depress-youth-voter-turnout-in-2022-midterm-elections>.

¹¹ Chamie, Joseph. “Who’s Not Voting in America?” *The Hill*, The Hill, 8 July 2021, <https://thehill.com/opinion/campaign/561886-whos-not-voting-in-america/>.

¹² Pronk NP, Kleinman DV, Richmond TS. Healthy People 2030: Moving toward equitable health and well-being in the United States. *EclinicalMedicine*. 2021;33:100777. Published 2021 Mar 6. doi:10.1016/j.eclinm.2021.100777



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assistance agencies including Medicaid and other programs must offer voter registration opportunities and assistance to all individuals applying for benefits or benefit renewal.¹³

Provide a public update and host a listening session on how HHS is responding to and working to align their programs with the President's Executive Order from March 2021.

The Biden Administration released Executive Order 14019, March 7, 2021: Promoting Access to Voting. The Executive Order requires agency leaders to consider ways to "...expand citizens' opportunities to register to vote and to obtain information about, and participate in, the electoral process" through evaluation of programs and providing relevant information to the public about how to register to vote, request a vote-by-mail ballot, and cast a ballot in upcoming elections.¹⁴ Following the President's Executive Order, secretaries were required to provide a memo on what they will do to promote voter participation. We request a copy of the HHS memo, including all agency efforts, in response to the Executive Order. Further, we request an information and listening session to discuss and learn how we can best support HHS' efforts on this important initiative. Lastly, on December 8, 2021, the White House released a fact sheet "[The Biden-Harris Administration is Taking Action to Restore and Strengthen American Democracy](#)" that included the commitment: "The Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS) will make it easier for consumers using HealthCare.gov to connect to voter registration services and receive assistance. CMS will also work with states on improving access to voter registration." We request an update on this commitment and a proposed timeline for what specific actions will be taken to fulfill this commitment.

¹³ United States, Congress, NATIONAL VOTER REGISTRATION ACT. 1973. 74 FR 37520

¹⁴ Biden, J., 2021. *Executive Order on Promoting Access to Voting* | *The White House*. [online] Available at: <<https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/presidential-actions/2021/03/07/executive-order-on-promoting-access-to-voting/>> [Accessed 18 July 2022].