

Civic Engagement and Population Health



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.

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. 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. The American Heart Association recognizes that meaningful civic engagement can help mitigate inequality, and can empower historically marginalized communities.

The scope of The American Heart Association's civic engagement work will continue to evolve in response to the policy environment and the needs of individuals with heart disease and stroke. 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 create quality health care.

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

benefit themselves and the groups to which they belong. People with more social capital have more support to adhere to healthier diets and to be more physically active. Civic engagement can also increase feelings of belonging which can lead to decreased feelings of social isolation and improved psychological health. 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 while simultaneously lowering the risks of cognitive impairment and hypertension.

The American Heart Association supports 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.

3 THINGS TO KNOW



- 1 Healthier people are more likely to be civically engaged, and civic engagement improves participants' health.
- 2 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.
- 3 Acknowledging residents' health and social needs is particularly relevant to effective civic engagement efforts.