



Population Health Alliance Quality and Research Committee

Overview

SOCIAL DETERMINANTS OF HEALTH AND HEALTH DISPARITIES



TAKING ACTION

White Paper: Social Determinants of Health and Health Disparities, Taking Action

Overview

The Population Health Alliance (PHA) Quality and Research Committee developed this White Paper through more than a year of research, deliberation, and strategic thinking focused on Social Determinants of Health (SDH). SDH are modifiable factors that hamper efforts to achieve improved health outcomes, often resulting in health disparities within populations. SDH include the domains of:

- Economic stability (including employment status, level of education, housing stability, physical environment, personal and community safety, food stability, lack of reliable transportation)
- Access to quality health care including both physical and behavioral/mental health resources and access to affordable health insurance
- Negative and positive health behaviors (attitudes and actions by the individual in relationship to health outcomes)

Emergence of value-based care in the U.S. necessitates that health care system partners – employers, providers, health plans, wellbeing vendors, consumers, local, regional and federal governments – take action to understand and mitigate the impact of SDH on health and health disparities. Core to this effort is development of alliances and partnerships across sectors. PHA is leading this work to identify best practices and problem-solve with members and the healthcare community to create and sustain cross-sector partnerships for health.

This White Paper offers evidence from published literature and practice addressing gaps in understanding of social determinants, including:

- An examination of the current state of research and interventions related to SDH
- Understanding the link between SDH and health disparities and how SDH impacts health outcomes
- Examining the potential for population health improvement by addressing SDH, an area of particular relevance to population health solution providers and partners
- Identifying currently available technology and analytics approaches that are or could potentially be used to identify and intervene in member populations
- Expanding PHAs' Framework for Population Health Management by systematically incorporating strategies to assess, manage, and measure changes in SDH
- Recommending policy and research needed to further develop interventions relating to SDH

The SDH Environment

The past decade has brought significant improvements in defining SDH and understanding how SDH influences health. Important contextual issues are discussed here. Social factors, including education, racial segregation, social supports, and poverty, account for over one-third of total deaths in the US annually. Unfortunately, the US does not target these health determinants in a systematic manner. In fact, the US spends the least on social services related to retirement, disability, employment programs, and supportive housing in comparison to other developed countries.

To date, employers have focused mainly on the cost of health care. A recent survey of health plans and other stakeholders in healthcare found that organizations are beginning to apply diverse strategies to

influence SDH, although no universal or comprehensive strategies appear to be in place. Emerging value-based care strategies, which tend to align financial incentives of employers, providers, and potentially, employees, may prompt greater attention to benefit structures and underlying SDH to improve population health *before* emergence of acute illness and complications from chronic illness.

Intervention Strategies

The White Paper presents what is currently known about reducing the impacts of SDH, and what is still to be learned. Addressing SDH is a multi-stakeholder, multi-sector imperative, with stakeholders playing different, and complementary roles. Known key tenants include:

- Focusing on the delivery of medical care alone without also focusing on SDH cannot significantly improve health outcomes
- Developing aligned partnerships between provider organizations, business partners, and communities is most likely to result in better health of populations
- Accountable care models such as value-based care are driving a focus on SDH
- Board and senior leadership must set, support and fund strategic direction that includes SDH awareness and intervention at all levels of the organization
- Developing enhanced data frameworks to drive and support identification of, and intervention into SDH risk areas

Interventions that tend to adopt a *life-course perspective* (e.g. an approach to impact the health of the individuals throughout their lives) hold promise to support positive health outcomes. Emerging technology and analytics are already transforming the delivery of population health and are making significant inroads into addressing SDH. Promising strategies include use of big data, internet and digital interventions, and better deployment of technology, including telehealth and mobile phones.

While the US has made great progress on understanding SDH and the impact on health, we still need to develop and achieve a national strategy for better care, healthy people, and healthy communities at an affordable cost. Key needs include consistent individual and community assessment of SDH, using standardized assessment tools, making SDH assessment data available at the individual and community levels, resource registries with up to date information needed to intervene on SDH, and standardized reportable metrics on the impact of SDH and SDH interventions.

A PHA Framework for Action

As organizations take steps to innovate and change culture to focus on SDH and health disparities, they need a roadmap to follow. The PHA Population Health Management Framework presents us this enduring roadmap. The Framework serves as a guide to population health improvement and aligns with strategies needed mitigate SDH. The White Paper identifies ways to augment capability to address SDH in each core function of population health management.

Reducing the impact of social determinants of health is the health improvement challenge of the next decade. Population health improvement cannot move forward by targeting health services alone. Since achieving equitable health for all individuals is the complex outcome of many inputs – including biology, behavior, and social determinants, the imperative is to understand which determinants impact health and which interventions have the potential of enduring health improvement. As the premier organization committed to driving improvements in population health, PHA commits to providing leadership moving forward.