

**BLOG**

# Where Policy Meets Community: Advancing Health Equity Locally

Read our Democracy & Governance blog series

By Sarah de Guia

- In the fourth entry of ChangeLab Solutions' Democracy & Governance blog series, CEO Sarah de Guia explores how community leaders and policymakers can build relationships to advance practical, equitable policy solutions.
- When community leaders and public officials connect through shared values, they can collaborate on policies that promote health, equity, and opportunity – especially at the local level, where trust and responsiveness are key.
- Community leaders and policymakers can make progress by focusing on actionable policy solutions – such as equitable park access, small business supports, broadband expansion, and paid leave policies – that reflect shared goals and local needs.

## Building Bridges Between Communities & Policymakers

Over the past few months, we have been sharing the importance of engaging in policy change to dismantle inequities and improve health. This blog post focuses on relationship building between policymakers and

community leaders to advance local, community-driven policy solutions. Despite the unpredictable landscape at the federal level, they can work locally to support better health and equal opportunities.

At ChangeLab Solutions, we believe that law and policy change are central to health equity. We work with partners to use these tools to design and implement equitable and practical solutions to complex public health challenges. Today, we offer a few ideas on how to begin or continue conversations between policymakers and community leaders in areas where you might find common ground. We understand that today's political environment can be tricky or tense, yet the way forward involves taking small steps. Here are some ways to begin your outreach and engagement:

## Step 1: Find Shared Values

Research shows that most of us share common values such as healthy communities and environments that support our collective health and well-being. We may have different ideas on the pathways for making these shared values a reality for our communities, but if we can establish common ground as we begin building our relationship, we can often find compromises on how we get there.

As a first step, before you contact the community leader or policymaker that you are seeking to connect with, you should identify areas of common ground, such as where you or your family grew up, shared educational or other institutions, areas of work, or even interests and hobbies. You might share a story from your experience that helps to solidify this common connection. Other ways to connect might be asking them what they enjoy about working in policy change or about their vision for a project or the wider community.

Whichever questions you choose to ask, you should focus on what will help cement the areas of common ground and values. After that, consider highlighting examples of what is going well in your community by offering stories of successes and positive impacts. You can also identify challenges or areas of potential concern that align with those values and then offer solutions that will align with your shared values as well.

## Step 2: Identify Actionable Policy Ideas

Once you have established shared values with the person you are trying to build a relationship with, the next step is to identify policy ideas that reflect those values and address community priorities. Actionable solutions with broad appeal that communities across the political spectrum support – like equitable park access, small business supports, broadband expansion, and paid leave – can create opportunities for collaboration between community leaders and policymakers. The next sections provide a few examples of how you can frame a local challenge, propose a policy or programmatic solution, and make a clear ask of a decision maker.

### Increasing Access to Parks & Open Spaces

**Local Challenges:** Parks and other public spaces are important places to gather, exercise, and relax. Parks enhance communities by promoting active living, helping residents connect and build relationships, and increasing green space. To make parks and public spaces available for community use, collaborations with

community involvement and shared use agreements are needed. Unfortunately, in many neighborhoods, the benefits of parks are not fairly distributed across groups of people, and there are clear patterns across socioeconomic and race demographics.

**Potential Solutions:** Complete Parks is a holistic approach that allows communities to plan and develop park systems that provide equitable access to quality parks that support health and benefit all community members. Rather than focusing only on parks and their boundaries, the Complete Parks system encompasses a wider view that includes the street and transit system; proximity to schools, businesses, services, and other parks; the people in the area; their sense of safety and connections to one another; and more.

**Asks:** Asks to decision makers or policymakers about equitable park access can focus on community engagement and collaboration across sectors to create resolutions, shared use agreements, or other mechanisms to create park systems that can be enjoyed by all community members. Parks are a great platform for bringing together many partners and policymakers on shared values because creating a Complete Parks system cuts across many different issues. Fostering this collaborative approach ensures that local circumstances, context, and desires – such as transportation and safety concerns or housing, schools, and other community assets – are incorporated into the design, accessibility, and location of parks and green spaces.

**Resources:** [The How of Complete Parks](#) and [Complete Parks Playbook](#)

## Supporting Small Businesses

**Local Challenges:** The adage “Small businesses are the backbone of America” still holds true today, despite the decline of current economic indicators. Between 2013 and 2023, small businesses accounted for [55% of total net job creation in the United States](#), along with a host of immeasurable benefits to their communities such as cultural preservation and leading social and economic justice movements. Many small businesses, including nonprofit organizations, also provide essential services, from food delivery to support for access to social services for older Americans, non-English speakers, and other underserved groups. Small businesses are currently experiencing economic uncertainty, rapidly increasing costs, and declining consumer confidence. These challenges are exacerbated for rural business owners, especially those from historically marginalized communities, due to myriad structural challenges. Less than 1% of venture capital dollars go to rural startups, and only 3% of Small Business Innovation Research (SBIR) and Small Business Technology Transfer (STTR) funding in 2005-2017 went to [micropolitan and non-metro areas](#).

**Potential Solutions:** To help bolster jobs, improve the local economy, and foster cultural vibrancy, these businesses need accessible economic support and reduced administrative barriers and burdens. Two options to consider are streamlined procurement processes and accessible lending options. Institutions such as businesses, government agencies, hospitals, and schools purchase large sums of goods and services every day. When these institutions implement values-based procurement standards that prioritize values such as workers' rights, racial equity, environmental sustainability, access to healthy foods, and local purchasing, their spending has the potential to generate wins for communities, workers, and businesses. Additionally, small businesses

need better access to capital, including loans, amid an ongoing trend of bank closures in rural places. Solutions include offering grants instead of loans, using alternative ways to assess creditworthiness, and streamlining applications to remove unnecessary barriers.

**Asks:** Asks for community leaders and policymakers can include supporting streamlined procurement practices. Institutions and decision makers can support small businesses in other ways, such as facilitating networking events, providing technical assistance where feasible, providing access to competent and culturally appropriate mentorship, and facilitating access to flexible funding for businesses.

**Resources:** [Using the Power of Procurement for Healthier Communities](#) and [Rural Policymaking resources](#)

## Expanding Broadband Access

**Local Challenges:** Broadband internet is an essential utility for participating fully in today's society and economy. Broadband is used to access health care, education, social connection, the job market, and more. However, large swaths of the US population still do not have access to broadband internet. Geographic and socioeconomic barriers to accessing broadband remain, which means that areas without broadband access are disproportionately concentrated in rural areas, tribal lands, and low-income communities. These disparities in broadband access contribute to other inequities such as the achievement gap, labor force participation, income, health care access, and social isolation, to name a few.

**Proposed Solutions:** Policymakers can facilitate partnerships and coalitions with institutions that have a vested interest in broadband expansion, such as tribal governments, hospitals, broadband providers, local governments, etc. These institutions can work collaboratively to leverage their lobbying power to dismantle legislative and infrastructural barriers to broadband access – for example, by ending data caps, expanding 5G technology in geographically isolated areas, and supporting the [Spectrum for Broadband Competition coalition](#).

**Asks:** Policymakers should be directed to invest in community-oriented broadband infrastructure and repeal state laws that restrict or prohibit municipal networks, which often offer more affordable and reliable service. Dedicated funding streams must prioritize rural, tribal, and low-income communities and require equitable access to broadband. By expanding public and private investment and removing legal barriers, decision makers can help reduce the digital divide and improve health and economic outcomes for people without broadband access.

**Resource:** [Broadband Connection in Rural Communities](#) and [Advancing Racial Equity in Rural Communities](#)

## Providing Paid Leave Policies

**Local Challenges:** As a nation, we have done too little to protect workers – particularly the most vulnerable workers – from income loss due to illness. According to the [2019 National Compensation Survey](#), almost one quarter of the US workforce (34 million people) lacks access to paid sick time. Paid sick leave has a significant positive impact on the work force and local economies, allowing workers paid time off to attend to short-term

medical needs for themselves, a family member, or a qualifying individual. Paid sick leave also slows the spread of infectious disease and promotes the use of preventive care – such as routine cancer screenings.

**Proposed Solutions:** In addition to paid sick leave, paid family leave to care for family members and one's own health has been shown to have many health-related benefits for mothers, children, and families – for example, increases in health benefits associated with breastfeeding, better mother-child interactions, and decreased maternal and marital stress. Paid family leave, in contrast to unpaid leave, has been shown to reduce infant mortality and improve other health outcomes among child populations with long-standing inequities.

**Asks:** Policymakers should support local, state, and federal actions to implement and expand paid sick and family leave policies that cover all workers, including those in part-time and gig-economy jobs. These policies should be equitably designed to ensure that marginalized workers are not excluded and that taking leave cannot be used to threaten job security or financial stability.

**Resources:** [Good for Business & Good for People: Paid Sick Leave Policies and Paid Family Leave Ensures Health Equity for All](#)

## Step 3: Connect with a Policymaker or Community Leader

Once you have identified the policy options you'd like to discuss, reach out to your elected official or local community leader to establish a connection. Once you have a meeting set up and you have shared your initial connection on values and other commonalities, present your case, keeping the following tips in mind:

- **Focus on commonalities and values:** Embed your discussion in shared values and issues that affect your community, speaking from your personal experience.
- **Elevate stories:** Share stories and experiences that highlight strengths and areas of need in your community or are connected to your policy issue.
- **Have an ask:** Make a clear ask, offer to be a resource for information, and follow up after your meeting with a thank-you and any materials discussed.
- **Offer resources:** Follow up on any unresolved questions or issues. Offer to serve as a resource on specific issues and topics on which you have expertise.
- **Focus on relationships:** Continue to build the relationship by connecting with the person on social media. Share appreciation when they act in support of your policy or issue of concern.

See these resources to find your federal, state, and local representatives:

- Find your members of Congress: [www.congress.gov/members/find-your-member](http://www.congress.gov/members/find-your-member)
- Find your state and local representatives: [www.commoncause.org/find-your-representative/#](http://www.commoncause.org/find-your-representative/#)

Discover more tips for engaging with policymakers:

- American Public Health Association's Top Ten Rules of Advocacy: [www.apha.org/policy-and-advocacy/advocacy-for-public-health/coming-to-dc/top-ten-rules-of-advocacy](http://www.apha.org/policy-and-advocacy/advocacy-for-public-health/coming-to-dc/top-ten-rules-of-advocacy)

## Local Action for Health Equity

As we have seen in the examples and action steps mentioned earlier, the path to health equity is built through relationships between decision makers and advocates that are grounded in shared values. By finding common ground and working closely throughout the changemaking process, community leaders and policymakers can shape policies that reflect the lived realities and priorities of the communities they represent and serve. Establishing these types of working partnerships is a foundational aspect of strengthening democracy at the local level.

To learn more, read the other posts in our Democracy & Governance series:

- Blog 1: [How Equitable Policymaking Supports Strong Democracy](#)
- Blog 2: [Vote, Advocate, Engage](#)
- Blog 3: [The Role of Governance in Creating a Healthy Democracy](#)
- Blog 4: [Where Policy Meets Community: Advancing Health Equity Locally](#)

We encourage you to stay engaged and connected with ChangeLab Solutions as we continue to elevate our tools, training, and technical assistance through our [Accelerating Policy Change](#) series.

*Thank you to the ChangeLab Solutions staff who contributed to this blog: Iyanick John, Patrick Glass, Tina Ansong, and Jessica Nguyen.*

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