

## CENTERING COMMUNITY IN PUBLIC HEALTH

# Community Centered Health Justice & Racial Equity: Organic Efforts Towards Health Equity-Driven Policy and Practice

### BACKGROUND

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The Praxis Project is proud to share this working brief, which highlights the vast efforts to improve community health and justice led by our partners who are organizing across the United States. **The purpose of this brief is to inform the broader practice of public health in the necessary and authentic engagement of basebuilding organizers—those who represent community’s interests—to advance policies, systems, practices and environmental change designed to improve health justice and racial equity** across four thematic peer-learning cohorts, known as Communities of Praxis (CPs). These Communities are:

- 1.) Family Supports and Economic Justice
- 2.) Early Care and Education Justice
- 3.) Housing Justice
- 4.) Utilities Justice

Each CP is comprised of up to 20 grassroots organizations working to advance policy and systems initiatives related to the cohort theme. The goal for this peer-learning work is to build capacity and collaboration among organizers to strengthen opportunities for health justice and racial equity across all communities.

### PROCESS

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Between June and July 2018, Praxis staff interviewed 62 community partners participating in the CPs to identify the policies, systems, practices, and environmental changes around which they organize. The interviews focused on identifying priority areas of work, and the context in which the priorities were developed. The report below breaks down the policy priority areas and solutions being advanced across the Communities of Praxis.

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**We envision a community that is in control of its own land and destiny, free of slumlords and gentrification.”**

**-Housing Justice Cohort Member**



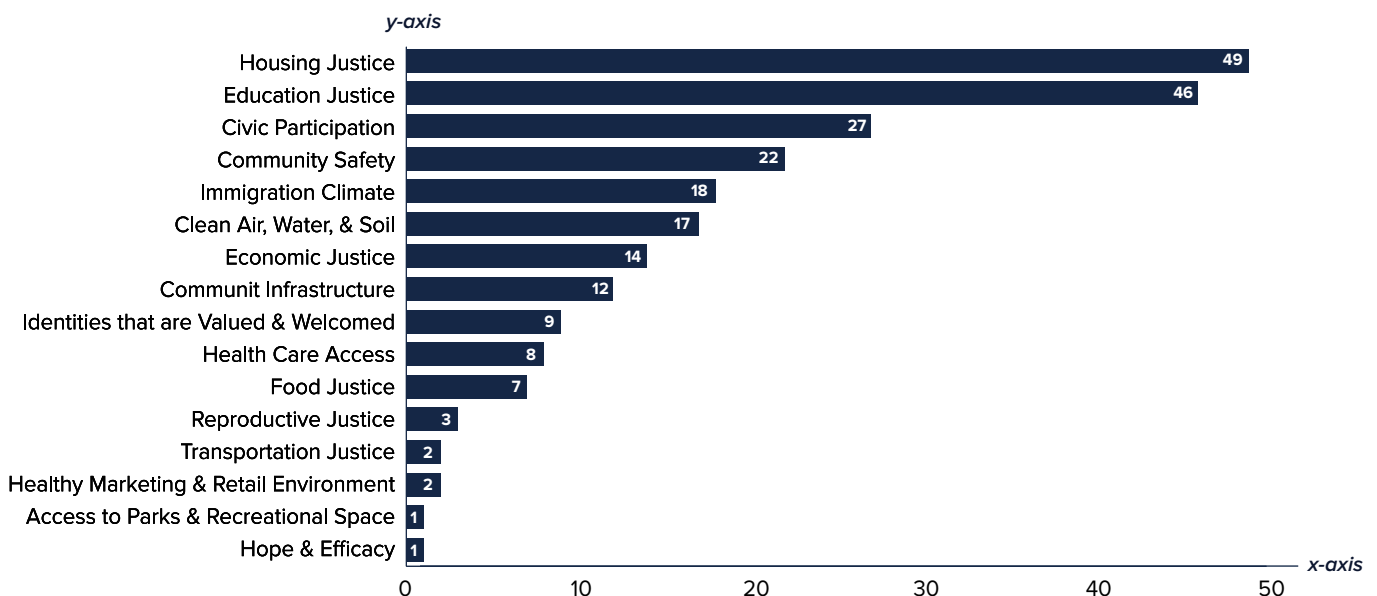
Learning Circles in Houston, TX, October 2018

## FINDINGS

**1. Community Basebuilders are engaged in multi-level and intersectional organizing, advocacy and systems change, reflecting the complex and evolving needs of the communities they work within.** Per the cross-CP data (see Table 1), housing justice, education justice, community safety and the immigration climate are currently core priorities across the CPs, regardless of the participant’s CP community.

**Table 1:** Prevalence of **Social Determinants of Health Equity** Across Peer-Learning Cohorts

The X axis represents the number of individual campaigns, initiatives or other efforts of the different organizations working on that social determinant.



**2. Basebuilding organizers are applying a community lens and generating community support to create policy, systems, practice and environment change to improve health justice and racial equity.** While some of the efforts reference proposed or passed legislation or other governmental policies, many efforts demonstrate communities’ own creation of alternatives to acknowledge and address the needs for which officials with political and economic power do not allocate resources. These alternatives are described below, all of which have a specific focus on communities of color and immigrant communities.

**POLICY PRIORITIES ACROSS THE SOCIAL DETERMINANTS OF HEALTH EQUITY**

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**HOUSING JUSTICE** .....

A just housing system ensures access to high-quality, safe, and affordable housing to residents with mixed income levels. Quality housing reduces stress and provides individuals with a sense of security. Housing located near necessary resources and amenities, such as grocery stores, employment opportunities, and parks promotes health by providing individuals with access to necessary goods and services.

- Advocate for community voice at the forefront of housing policy that impacts children and families.
- Advocate for housing development with community input at the forefront, partly to prevent displacement.
- Promote affordable housing protection, preservation and creation including through maintaining affordability scorecards.
- Advocate for tenants’ rights, including rent control, just cause and repeat evictions, and right to counsel.
- Address poor housing conditions and landlord accountability through landlord registries and advocating for repairs (including city funding of public housing repairs).
- Promote community ownership of land and resources such as land trusts.
- Decrease the commercialization of land and housing
- Pursue tenant governance including through councils and unions that can focus on broad housing injustice and related issues of concerns.
- Acknowledge of chronic homelessness and funding to intervene in and prevent it.
- Promote home retrofitting as part of a larger effort towards energy democracy and economic justice (vis-à-vis decreasing electric bills).



## EDUCATION JUSTICE

A just education system provides access to high quality education and literacy development for learners of all ages and backgrounds. Educational equity encourages health literacy and lays the foundation for upward mobility through greater employment opportunities.

- Combat the school to prison pipeline (with special attention to the adultification of black girls).
- Advocate for police-free schools.
- Ensure accurate counts of students to effectively understand and respond to student needs.
- Promote equal education opportunity including funding equity.
- Monitor the Every Student Succeeds Act and Student Bill of Rights to close racial and economic disparities among students and public/charter schools.
- Promote pathways to higher education including the cradle to career/college pipeline.
- Prioritize pre-K readiness.
- Promote access to mental/other health services for children and families.
- Advocate for youth access to quality education through sustainable community schools that are not vulnerable to ongoing school closings in Chicago.
- Direct disaster recovery focusing on public school closures-and-replacement by charter schools (compounding existing barriers to educational equity for minority-majority schools).

## CIVIC PARTICIPATION

Civic participation refers to when individuals or a collective of people engage through formal or informal activities such as voting or volunteering to benefit their self, families or entire communities. People's right to participate civically should be protected, broadened and encouraged to exercise regardless of their race, ethnicity, sex, gender, or even age. Decision makers must be responsive to individuals and communities' needs communicated through their civic participation. The strength of our democracy and the ability to protect everyone's rights and interests requires inclusive civic processes at all levels.

- Promote civic engagement, Know Your Rights and other political education.
- Engage voters of various ethnic groups and different immigration statuses.



- Engage parent/youth/community in leadership development and organizing of advocacy around educational equity.
- Build power and capacity of individual and community indigenous farmworkers and rural residents.
- Educate on voting rights and related issues around the political and budget decision-making apparatuses.
- Engage community in municipal planning including development, housing affordability, zoning and land control.
- Advocate for legislative and other policies around tenant rights, embedding a housing justice platform throughout levels of government and reinforcing leadership development of residents.
- Educate residents on pertinent issues to inform them on development and displacement, and encourage their engagement.
- Promote digital equity and inclusion.
- Build awareness and leadership development.
- Advocate for language access/justice in health and education.
- Advocate for data sovereignty.
- Ensure governance by diverse stakeholders.
- Advocate for environmental justice legislation.

## COMMUNITY SAFETY

Everyone should feel and be safe in their home, work, school and community. An individual's community should be a nurturing and restorative, not punitive, environment. Beyond violence prevention, it is about dealing with chronic stress and healing from the trauma already experienced directly, indirectly, or collectively in their community. Building community safety requires public safety officials to be knowledgeable about the community they are intended to serve to have their safety interests in mind. Community safety requires using healing centered care and engagement (vs. trauma-informed) that is accessible to anyone regardless of across race, class, age, sex, gender and ethnicity.

- Focus on police and community/schools by addressing harm and promoting police accountability in community/police interactions, and redirecting budget priorities away from jails and prisons toward social and educational supports.
- Focus on incarceration/justice system reform by changing practices that limit opportunities for people reentering their community from incarceration, and addressing racial and ethnic disparities in the justice system (i.e. building community-based alternatives to incarceration and detention).
- Promote community infrastructure and policies that create safety (i.e. policies that help reduce gun violence, and expansion of street lighting).
- Advocate for school police (including those contracted through local police departments) accountability and related tracking such as the posting of data on suspensions, expulsions and arrests.
- Ensure maintenance of student rights throughout disciplinary interventions.
- Prioritize restorative rather than punitive discipline, towards ending criminalization and mass incarceration of youth of color and maximizing time in class.
- Facilitate positive school climate including gender-based safe spaces.
- Elevate student-led/centered efforts to prevent gun violence in schools and broader community.
- End corporal punishment in schools.
- Recognize how housing injustice is further compounded by challenges residents face in terms of access to programs and social services and the pervasiveness of missing and murdered women and girls of color (and the corresponding lack of response by law enforcement).
- Enforce identification to access basic needs like food, youth curfew and abuse of bail/related bias in pretrial risk assessment (an example of the opportunity to promote both humane and equitable use of technology).



## IMMIGRATION CLIMATE

Just immigration policies support individuals when they leave countries and conditions that endanger their lives or deprive them of opportunities for health. These include policies that protect families from being separated, reduce fear in communities, protect individuals' livelihoods, and facilitate access to quality, health-affirming services.

- Provide legal advocacy including the right to an attorney to Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals and Temporary Protected Status recipients as well as others without those statuses who are undocumented, regardless of status.
- Secure protections for Temporary H-2A and H-2B agricultural workers, including those to prevent and respond to underpayment and workplace harassment.
- Fight increased targeting- and deportation-driven policy through working to maximize rights and limit arrests, as well as to limit local police-Immigration and Customs Enforcement cooperation.
- Advocate to Keep Families Together.
- Establish sanctuary cities and schools.
- Pass the DREAM Act.
- Achieve tuition equity for youth who have various immigration statuses (including those who are too young to benefit from DACA).
- Prevent landlords threatening immigrants based on vulnerabilities arising from different immigrant statuses.
- Support just transition in terms of unpaid dues to undocumented workers.

## CLEAN AIR, WATER & SOIL

Safe and non-toxic water, soil, indoor and outdoor air are imperative to ensuring community health and protecting residents. Pollution and toxic exposures impose devastating health risks on residents, which often require complex and expensive treatment and care.

- Fight pesticides in agriculture.
- Campaign against sulfide mining and related environmental and health harms.
- Localize water control.
- Advocate for broader rights of nature and climate justice policy.
- Fight illegal dumping.
- Prevent flooding disasters.
- Educate residents on toxins and facilitate related healing.
- Ban or limit hydraulic fracturing and mining.
- Advocate for soil, water and air toxicity testing and monitoring.
- Implement air quality caps.
- Retain and expand water rights and protections.
- Maintain chemical securities.
- Promote information-sharing around the plastics glut.

## ECONOMIC JUSTICE

Economic Justice refers to the availability of safe, reliable, high quality employment opportunities that provide individuals with living wages and salaries. It also includes equitable opportunities for asset ownership, including homes and businesses. Economic justice prioritizes the equitable distribution of wealth, resources and taxation policies. Economic justice promotes health by creating opportunities for economic security and enabling the purchase of health-promoting goods and services.

- Advocate for partial settlement and compensation of previously denied FEMA (Federal Emergency Management Agency) claims receipts for emergency relief funds.
- Promote collective bargaining for farm workers.
- Promote access to community ownership including in the form of community banks, small business and worker cooperatives.





- Support communities of color who are pushed out of urban areas due to gentrification.
- Advocate for funding equity for specific groups such as youth (who are children of/ immigrants).
- Pursue overtime pay for immigrant farm- and domestic workers at the 8 hour rather than 10 hour mark.
- Advance food justice and sustainability through a focus on youth and community control.
- Consider opportunities to maximize the establishment of large-scale developments like the Obama Presidential Center in Chicago.
- Prioritize opportunities and benefits for residents already living in areas versus the often disproportionate, harm-inducing focus on those who are moving in.
- Just transition through job and revenue creation as well as environmental sustainability.

## COMMUNITY INFRASTRUCTURE .....

Safe community infrastructure refers to the development of aspects of the built environment, including complete streets, sidewalks, marked crossings, public utilities, and community gathering spaces. Good maintenance of functional infrastructure plays a critical role in promoting health by encouraging residents to feel safe and capable of traveling throughout their communities.

- Map areas of broadband access under-connectivity.
- Promote net neutrality.
- Advocate for affordable cable coverage and industry worker protections.
- Advocate for water justice, including the areas of clean water, language and migrant justice, distribution, rights protections, continuance of traditional management methods, and sustainability.

## IDENTITIES THAT ARE VALUED & WELCOMED .....

Cultural identity refers to individuals' ability to creatively express and celebrate their culture, history and traditions. It also calls for arts and culture to positively reflect and value the backgrounds of all community residents. Positive reflections of cultural identities encourage health by promoting a sense of pride and community connection among people.



- Tackle the prevalence of hate crimes in certain communities.
- Ensure inclusivity around gender and sexual orientation in sexual and healthy relationships education of youth in schools.
- Formalize cultural relevance in schools through language access/interpretation services and curriculum including but not limited to ethnic studies course offerings.
- Engage youth in consciousness- and narrative-building (and related skill-building) outside of the school setting.
- Elevate cultural organizing as a strategic use of arts and culture to work toward policy and practice shifts that empower marginalized people.
- Advocate for language justice.
- Promote traditional knowledge.
- Preserve and reclaim Indigenous roots, culture and spirituality.

## HEALTH CARE ACCESS

An equitable health care system provides universal access to high quality, affordable, and culturally appropriate clinical care that is responsive to the social conditions that influence an individual's health. Access to health care empowers individuals to actively engage in preventive and health-promoting activities and provides a safety net in the unfortunate event of major health crises.

- Advocate for access to and build awareness of Medicaid and other benefits.
- Inform and educate consumers through health promotion around sugary drinks and cosmetics ingredient labeling.
- Develop insurance plans to expand access to care through worker cooperatives.
- Include food and nutrition as part of student rights.
- Promote after school and summer wellness programming.



- Expand general health services for those not insured by Medicaid and/or who require (currently unavailable/inaccessible) culturally and linguistically appropriate behavioral health services, adult education and other services.

## FOOD JUSTICE

Food security means having safe and reliable access to an appropriate amount of nutritious food at an affordable price. In order to have the ability to maintain a healthy diet, individuals and families must feel secure in their ability to buy healthy foods. Entire communities experience food insecurity at a macro level, sometimes referred to as food apartheid. Food apartheid results from political and economic decisions rooted in structural racism, which have inequitably led to long-term disinvestment in primarily low-income communities and communities of color.

- Ensure basic access to food, both through purchasing as well as growing food.
- Facilitate organic food consumption.
- Work through food justice to strengthen and revitalize ancestral ways of life—for example, food sovereignty as part of decolonization.
- Advocate for junk food taxation concurrent with no taxation on healthy foods: and redirecting revenues to community needs.





## REPRODUCTIVE JUSTICE

Reproductive justice refers to an individual's social, political, and economic power to make empowering and healthy choices regarding their sexual and reproductive health. This includes access to affordable and supportive care providers that support women's autonomy to make decisions about when and if to have children, to create a safe community to parent children, , as well as the availability of services that are responsive to people's sexual orientation and gender identity. An equitable reproductive justice system promotes health by ensuring access to comprehensive care options and recognizing that reproductive oppression affects individuals differently based on their identity.

- Reduce maternal and child mortality and morbidity.
- Expand student parental leave without compromising equal access to education.
- Build access to comprehensive care through exposing and combating crisis pregnancy centers that attempt to mislead patients seeking abortion and birth control.

## TRANSPORTATION JUSTICE

An equitable transportation system provides users with access to safe, reliable and affordable modes of transportation including public transit, walking, and biking. Access to transportation is critical to promoting health because it allows individuals to move around freely and connects them to resources such as employment opportunities, schools, healthcare services, and parks and recreational spaces.

- Advocate for an accessible bus system combined with continued unionization of the transit system. Partners understand that transit systems maximize community benefits while countering negative impacts of gentrification and economic disadvantage.
- Manage a bicycle cooperative



## HEALTHY MARKETING & RETAIL ENVIRONMENT

A healthy marketing and retail environment promotes the sale of safe, healthy and affordable products and services. The accessibility of such products allows consumers of all backgrounds to make informed and health conscious decisions about their purchases and the products they are consuming

- Establish corporate accountability around sales of toxic goods at dollar stores.

## ACCESS TO PARKS & RECREATIONAL SPACE

Ample availability and access to safe, clean and green open parks and recreational spaces, that appeal to interests and activities across generations, incentivize physical activity among residents. Communities that lack the resources to support low-cost physical activity often fall into sedentariness and are more likely to experience social-emotional problems.

- Expand access to safe parks and open spaces; prioritize broader health equity.

## HOPE & EFFICACY

Hope and efficacy refer to an individual's capacity, desire, and ability to participate, communicate, and work to improve their family or community. They also incorporate individual or collective feelings of optimism for the future, opportunities for success, and wellbeing. Individual and collective hope and efficacy foster health by developing a mindset that fosters healthy choices and behaviors.

- Address the specific needs of marginalized groups like youth and community organizers and leaders; and those needing specialized services including those for mental health, reentry and disabilities. Healing is an underlying theme for partners focused on Hope and Efficacy.
- Disability advocacy, which trains parents on how to best support their child's learning and respond to disciplinary measures.

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PUBLIC HEALTH, PHILANTHROPY, & ALLIED PROFESSIONS:

We all deserve to be healthy, and to live in healthy and equitable environments. It is a basic human right, yet there are significant racial disparities in who has access to healthy environments.

The policy- and systems-change work of our grassroots partners is evidence that adds weight to a growing recognition in the public health and policy fields across the country: namely, that we can only obtain health justice and racial equity through acknowledging and building the capacity and authentically engaging basebuilding community organizers.

Our sample of several dozen local organizations across the country indicates that any given basebuilding community organizing-based group is leading change - specifically, with special attention to those social determinants that are not being comprehensively addressed through public health practice and policy-making. Organizers' anti-oppression approach and methods of working across different identities and social issues reach the most urgent social determinants: through transforming underlying socioeconomic, built, and natural environmental disparities.

While "building community power" is increasingly understood as crucial for moving from health equality to health justice and racial equity, we recommend **building partnerships and supporting the capacity of grassroots community organizing** as a specific starting point within efforts to build community power. By building power on a community-



prioritized issue today, we are creating the community infrastructure and scaffolding necessary to address future health or justice issues to come. Those community partners who are leading this work - who are also most impacted - need to be listened to and invested in, for our present and our future.

**Based on our findings, we urge foundations, funders, and other grantmaking organizations to identify and invest in multi-issue and high-impact nonprofit community organizing to reinforce equity-centered, community-driven policy, systems and environmental change. Together, organizers and traditional public health can join forces to build transformative health justice.**

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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Praxis Staff and participating organizations:

### **Housing Justice:**

AYPAL: Building API Community Power  
Causa Justa::Just Cause  
Chainbreaker Collective  
City Life/Vida Urbana  
Communities United  
Community Movement Builders  
Empower DC  
HomesForAll Nashville  
Housing Justice League  
Kenwood-Oakland Community Organization  
North Bay Organizing Project  
Right to the City in care of New England United for Justice  
Strategic Actions for a Just Economy (SAJE)  
Struggle for Miami's Affordable and Sustainable Housing (SMASH), Inc  
Take Back The Land Rochester  
Tenants Union of WA  
Texas Housers  
United for Justice - Right to the City

### **Family Supports and Economic Justice:**

Asian Services In Action, Inc  
Black Women for Wellness  
Central American Resource Center (CARECEN)  
Community to Community (C2C)  
Council on American Islamic Relations (CAIR)  
Detroit Women of Color, Inc.  
Desis Rising Up and Moving (DRUM)  
Freedom. Inc.  
Grassroots Leadership  
La Plazita Institute  
La Union del Pueblo Entero (LUPE)  
Menikanaehkem  
Pan-African Community Development Initiative  
People Organizing to Demand Environmental and Economic Justice (PODER)

Providence Youth Student Movement  
Southeast Immigrant Rights Network  
U.S. Federation of Worker Cooperatives

### **Early Care and Education Justice:**

Baltimore Algebra Project  
Black Organizing Project  
Coleman Advocates for Children and Youth  
Cook Inlet Tribal Council  
Families and Friends of Louisiana's Incarcerated Children (FFLIC)  
Global Action Project  
Gwinnett SToPP  
InnerCity Struggle  
Khmer Girls in Action  
Miami Children's Initiative  
Mixteco/Indigena Community Organizing Project  
Nollie Jenkins Family Center, Inc.  
Padres & Jovenes Unidos  
Providence Student Union  
Southern Echo Inc.  
Youth Empowered in the Struggle

### **Utilities Justice:**

Central Valley Urban Institute  
Connect Your Community Institute  
Diné Citizens Against Ruining our Environment  
Diné Community Advocacy Alliance  
Genesee County Hispanic Latino Collaborative-La Placita  
Latin American Betterment Association (LABA) Link  
Martinez Street Women's Center  
Media Mobilizing Project  
New Mexico Acequia Association  
One Voice  
Texas Environmental Justice Advocacy Services



The Praxis Project is a values-driven, national nonprofit organization that seeks to improve justice and equity through partnerships to build community power. Praxis believes strongly that organized communities are critical partners in the struggle to create just and equitable communities.

**Our mission** is to build healthy communities by transforming the power relationships and structures that affect our lives and communities.

#### **LEARN MORE ABOUT OUR WORK**

Visit our website, [www.thepraxisproject.org](http://www.thepraxisproject.org), to learn more about our initiatives and explore our multimedia resources.



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