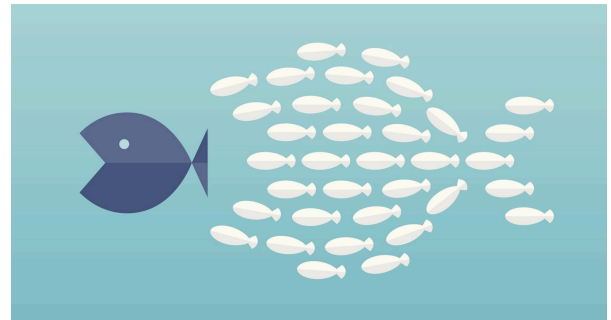


# Power-building is Public Health Work

*This moment demands that public health practitioners not only respond to crises but also contribute to solutions that are led by communities and rooted in justice.*

## Public Health's Role in Building Community Power to Achieve Equity

Public health can and must be a force for transforming the conditions impacting our communities' health. For too long, many in the field have seen themselves as neutral actors. But neutrality is not an option when injustice drives health outcomes. Public health professionals can help fuel movements for justice by bringing their expertise and skills in data, storytelling, research, and policy that can help fuel movements for justice — if they are aligned with frontline campaigns and community power-building work ([JPHMP](#)).



Public health is at a crossroads. In a time of widespread disinformation, funding cuts, and growing attacks on health equity, racial justice, and democratic systems, the field is being tested. Years of underinvestment, politicization, and burnout have led to an exodus of public health professionals ([AJPH](#)). Trust is declining, and the sector struggles to address root causes of health inequities. **But public health also holds untapped potential to help communities fight back.**

This moment demands that public health practitioners not only respond to crises, but also **contribute to solutions led by communities and rooted in justice.**

*"Power properly understood is nothing but the ability to achieve purpose. It is the strength required to bring about social, political, and economic change. That's the way we must see ourselves: as powerful citizens, as those who have the right to shape their own destiny."*

—Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., *Where Do We Go From Here?*

See how we are meeting the moment:

[publichealth4communitypower.org](https://publichealth4communitypower.org)

# What is Power-Building?

**Power-building** is the work of organizing communities that are most impacted by structural injustice and building their ability to change systems, shape narratives, and advance equity. Learn more from [Lead Local](#).

## Public Health's Roots in Power Building for Equity

**Public health has a longstanding history of supporting social reform movements.** From labor rights and housing justice to HIV/AIDS activism and environmental justice, health practitioners have stood shoulder to shoulder with communities to shift power and win change. Today's efforts to partner with community power-building organizations are a continuation of that legacy – not a departure from it.

**When public health aligns with grassroots movements, we can:**

- **Build trust and shift mindsets**
- Align with community power-building organizations helps us build **deeper trust** with communities and **shift dominant narratives**—from individual blame to collective solutions, from institutional control to community self-determination.
- **Target Structural Inequities**  
Power-building shifts who gets to make choices about our biggest health challenges– including in housing, policing, climate change and labor rights. ([HIP](#))
- **Move from Awareness to Action**  
Racial and health justice requires redistributing power, supporting community leadership, and co-creating the conditions for long-term well-being. By working together, we can expand what's politically possible to advance health equity ([Health Affairs](#)).



*One framework for understanding and building community power is the power building ecosystem, by USC Equity Research Institute. [Learn more here.](#)*

See how we are meeting the moment:

[publichealth4communitypower.org](https://publichealth4communitypower.org)

## What We're Learning from the Field

A 2023 national scan of public health/community power-building partnerships surfaced lessons from across the country ([Health in Partnership, 2024](#)):

- **Partnerships are growing:** Non-governmental organizations and local health leaders are increasingly stepping into power-building roles.
- **This work builds capacity:** When done well, collaborations with community power-building organizations improve public health strategy, deepen racial equity commitments, and expand reach.
- **Change takes time:** Relationship-building, mutual trust, and shared learning are essential foundations for long-term impact.
- **What we do already can support movements:** Research and data, testimonies, communications and advocacy are things that community power building organizations want public health to do.

## Our Call to the Field

### **Power-building is core to the future of protecting the public's health.**

If we are serious about health equity, then we must be serious about power: who has it, who has been denied it, and how public health can help shift that balance toward justice.

**Join us in reclaiming public health's radical roots.** Align with the communities leading today's most critical fights — for housing, safety, voting rights, environmental justice, and more. Offer your skills, voice, and resources in service of collective liberation.

**Let's build a public health field that fights not just to prevent harm, but to win bold, visionary change.**

For more information email: [ph4cp@healthinpartnership.org](mailto:ph4cp@healthinpartnership.org)

See how we are meeting the moment:

[publichealth4communitypower.org](https://publichealth4communitypower.org)

# References

1. Gerberding JL. Back to the Future of Public Health. *Am J Public Health*. 2021 Apr;111(4):596–597. doi: 10.2105/AJPH.2021.306176. PMID: 33689423; PMCID: PMC7958022.
2. Fairchild AL, Rosner D, Colgrove J, Bayer R, Fried LP. The EXODUS of public health. What history can tell us about the future. *Am J Public Health*. 2010 Jan;100(1):54–63. doi: 10.2105/AJPH.2009.163956. PMID: 19965565; PMCID: PMC2791244.
3. Simon-Ortiz S, Bilick S, Gould S, Long C, Farhang L, Frey M, et al. Reimagining Public Health Advocacy Findings from a National Scan of Public Health and Community Power-building Groups. Berkeley, CA: Human Impact Partners; 2024 Nov [cited 2026 Jan 6]. Available from: <https://www.healthinpartnership.org/resources/reimagining-public-health-advocacy-findings-from-a-national-scan-of-public-health-and-community-power-building-groups>.
4. Heller JC, Little OM, Faust V, Tran P, Givens ML, Ayers J, Farhang L. Theory in Action: Public Health and Community Power Building for Health Equity. *J Public Health Manag Pract*. 2023 Jan-Feb 01;29(1):33–38. doi: 10.1097/PHH.0000000000001681. PMID: 36448756.
5. Simon-Ortiz S, Bilick S, Frey M, Gould S, Long C, Waugh E, Farhang L. Community Power-Building Groups And Public Health NGOs: Reimagining Public Health Advocacy. *Health Aff (Millwood)*. 2024 Jun;43(6):798–804. doi: 10.1377/hlthaff.2024.00035. PMID: 38830166.
6. Udow-Phillips M, Smyser J, Bagdasarian N. Rebuilding trust in public health and medicine in a time of declining trust in science. *J Hosp Med*. 2025 Jul;20(7):787–790. doi: 10.1002/jhm.70086. Epub 2025 Jun 3. PMID: 40462379; PMCID: PMC12217403.
7. 2025 report: Building power for health and equity. University of Wisconsin Population Health Institute; [cited 2026 Jan 6]. (Health Rankings & Roadmaps). Available from: <https://www.countyhealthrankings.org/findings-and-insights/2025-report>.

See how we are meeting the moment:

[publichealth4communitypower.org](https://publichealth4communitypower.org)