

PRELUDE

The Wisconsin of today is a sum of the history of the land and the economies it has supported, the people, past and present, who have inhabited this place, the reasons for why and how they have come to live here, and the politics and policy, from the local to the global, that intersect with the people and communities of this state. The Department of Health Services' State Health Assessment and Minority Health Report have invariably and consistently shown how measures of the burden of chronic and acute diseases, the rates of death and illness, and health-related behaviors vary by age, income, race, and so many other ways society classifies and characterizes people. Other reports and research abound, reiterating and detailing these many ways health conditions and outcomes vary at national, state, county, and neighborhood levels.

Wisconsin hovers not only in the shadow of our collective and full history, but also our present. As we continue to look for ways to navigate the shadow of the current pandemic, the unexpected event which has consumed our lives and likely, your lives, for much of the past two years. It has also taken the lives of far too many others'. The Covid-19 pandemic has helped to shine light on the state of existing gaps in health equity in Wisconsin, and further revealed the human, community and societal costs of those gaps, with people with limited incomes and minority populations, especially Black and Brown Wisconsinites, being the hardest hit in terms of cases, hospitalizations, and deaths as a result of their histories and present realities facing structural barriers – low wages and poor working conditions, inadequate housing, limited transportation options, and more – to health and well-being.

These shadows, our history and our present, are foundational for understanding and addressing contemporary health disparities impacting Wisconsinites and their communities across the state. This work begins with understanding that these health disparities are systemic, unjust and largely avoidable.

While we are told these differences result from personal failings, the reality is that social, economic, and environmental conditions, and differences in the ability of some groups to shape their own future, are the underlying causes. Poorer health outcomes are concentrated among communities and populations who have experienced some form of exclusion, whether historically or contemporary, whether economically, socially, and/or racially. That exclusion has taken many forms, including the colonization of Native Americans and their land, slavery and Jim Crow, the disenfranchisement of women and people of color, restrictions on immigration of Asian, Latino, and Black people, housing segregation, over-policing and incarceration, hiring discrimination, anti-LGBTQ norms and policies, structural poverty, and more. How exclusion plays out has morphed over our history, but has remained a feature of our democracy as it benefits the self-interests of the powerful and greedy.

These forms of exclusion are what drives health outcomes: they have grave influences on peoples' ability to earn a sustaining wage, to participate in our democratic society, to have choices about the food they eat and places they live, and to feel welcome wherever they may go. And with this, we must plot a course for a different future, one defined by fairness and inclusion, where we remove the unequal obstacles remaining in our midst so that there becomes an equal opportunity for everyone to live their life to the fullest. In service to this goal, we have identified a set of principles that will help guide our way forward.

PRINCIPLES

Wisconsin's strength comes from our ability to bring together hardworking people from different places and of different races to share our traditions and forge a better future. For this to be a place where everyone can thrive, we cannot let the self-interests of the powerful and greedy divide us based on what someone looks like, where they come from, or how much money they have. We must stand up for each other and come together to foster inclusive and welcoming communities across our state that support

everyone's health and well-being, regardless of their race or ethnicity, their socioeconomic status, gender, age, educational-level, experience with the criminal justice system, or their sexuality.

We can center a different set of principles than those that have recently driven our society, reexamining our programs, changing our policies, and rethinking how we analyze our current situation to reflect what truly drives health and well-being for each of us and our communities. Black, White, Brown and Indigenous. We are coming together to build a Wisconsin that is for all of us. Together, we can make Wisconsin a place where everyone can thrive. No exceptions.

To effectively pursue health equity and achieve a Wisconsin where everyone can thrive, we must embrace a shared set of standards of behavior and beliefs as a way of grounding and anchoring the work ahead, and which can serve as a framework to assess and evaluate the choices we, and those in power make. This new set of behaviors and beliefs must, instead of supporting the status of quo of exclusion, embrace and facilitate a new standard of radical inclusion. Under this tent, there is plenty of room for everyone.

These shared standards, what we call principles, must stand counter to much of what we have been taught and much of what has recently driven our society: that we must all pull ourselves up by our own bootstraps, that we do not have enough to allow everyone to thrive, that our government is the source of our problems, that economic growth is our sole aim, and that we are powerless to change our future. These ideas have led to many of the inequities in Wisconsin, and we can choose to live by a different set of principles.

As such, we offer the following principles as a way to elevate our conversations and support actions that move us beyond the reach of messages that serve to obstruct these pursuits. These principles reflect the Wisconsin we are committed to building and this council's commitment to our state.

1. **Everyone deserves respect and dignity.** Our worth comes from being alive — regardless of where we come from and what we look like, and what we do. Across many beliefs, dignity and autonomy continues in death, as well.
2. **Everyone deserves a fair shot at thriving.** The social, environmental, and economic policies and systems we make have the greatest influence on our opportunities to thrive. It is our job to transform our social fabric for health equity — so physical, mental, and social health and well-being are possible for everyone.
3. **In Wisconsin, we do not leave anyone behind.** Our well-being is bound to each other, and we take care of each other. It is our collective responsibility to cultivate strong, healthy communities.
4. **We believe all Wisconsinites should have a say in decisions that affect our lives.** Everyone brings knowledge that should guide public decision making. Meaningful inclusion leads to better decisions — and people thrive when we see ourselves as valued members of our communities.
5. **We know making Wisconsin better for all of us means we have to change what we do and how we do things. Change is both a process and an outcome, and is necessary for progress.** We're committed, hopeful, honest, and brave about the risks, transformation, and time it will take from each of us.
6. **Making all our communities healthy and safe starts with us.** We have what it takes to transform Wisconsin so that everyone has what they need to provide for themselves and their families. We are facing complex issues, and we will need to address them individually, in our communities, and in our institutions. It is our nature as humans to be creative and creatively solve the problems we face. We collectively have the knowledge, resources, and the power to change our communities and our state so that we can all thrive.

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