



Commonwealth of Virginia Equity Leadership Task Force

The equity leadership task force directs the work of the Health Equity Work Group (HEWG) as part of the unified command for the Commonwealth of Virginia.

The equity leadership task force includes an equity expert in each major partnering agency of the unified response (VDH, VDEM and the Governor’s Office). The Governor’s Office representative is the Chief Diversity Officer, who reports directly to the Governor. The VDEM representatives include the second in command at VDEM as well as a national health equity expert (a VDEM contractor). The VDH representative is the Acting Director of the Office of Health Equity. Each of these individuals report directly or have direct lines of communications with the principal decision-makers during the COVID-19 event: Governor Ralph S. Northam; State Health Commissioner M. Norman Oliver, MD, MA; and State Coordinator of Emergency Management, Jeffrey D. Stern. The equity leadership task force provides direct guidance to the Health Equity Work Group as part of the unified command for the Commonwealth of Virginia.

Governor’s Office - Cabinet	VDH	VDEM
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Health Equity Working Group (HEWG) Description

Collaboratively the equity leadership team guides the overall work of the HEWG and all sub-working groups of the COVID-19 response. Per the organizational chart, the HEWG reports directly to the COVID-19 Unified Command Leadership Group. The HEWG is an innovative coalition embedded at the senior-level of Virginia’s unified command structure for the COVID-19

public health crisis. The first-of-its-kind in Virginia state history and nationally to exist within an emergency response body, the nearly 50 member HEWG serves as a cabinet-level mechanism that convenes representatives from:

- each agency and advisory board of the Virginia Health and Human Resources Secretariat;
- the Office of the Secretary of the Commonwealth and related constituent advisory boards;
- leadership from relevant state entities across the Commonwealth; as well as
- representatives from private human service organizations, advocacy and stakeholder groups, community leaders, and diverse faith leaders

in order to ensure health equity is central to every decision made throughout this crisis.

The purpose of the HEWG is to apply a health equity lens to the Commonwealth of Virginia's COVID-19 response by proactively and reactively:

- Identifying and prioritizing resources and decision points impacting marginalized and at-risk individuals and communities.
- Supporting intentional inclusion of the needs of at-risk and marginalized individuals and communities within each working group related to preparedness, mitigation, response, and recovery.

Centering Common Language

Equality ≠ Equity While sometimes being mistakenly used interchangeably, it's important to understand that equality is not the same as equity. This is best demonstrated and explained by referencing the picture below.

What we see on the bottom is equality: people of differing needs, receiving the same resource. Because they are of differing levels of need, we can clearly see that everyone does not benefit from the resource. In fact, in at least one case one of the individuals can't use it at all.

What we see on the top is equity: people of differing needs, receiving the resources they actually need. Because each individual is receiving what they need, they can all benefit.

Equality is giving everyone the same amount of resources.

Equity is giving people the amount of resources they actually need. This means communities with less, should receive more.



Health Equity

When all people and communities have the opportunity to attain their full potential and highest level of health. (CommonHealth ACTION, Braveman and Gruskin, 2003).

Health Disparity

Differences in health status among distinct segments of the population including differences that occur by gender, race or ethnicity, education or income, disability, or living in various geographic localities.

Health Inequity

Disparities in health [or health care] that are systemic and avoidable and, therefore, considered unfair or unjust.

Communities of Color

Communities of color are identity-based communities that hold a primary racial identity that describes shared racial characteristics among community members. The term aims to define a characteristic of the community that its members share (such as being African American) that supports self-definition by community members, and that typically denotes a shared history and current/historic experiences of racism.

An older term for communities of color is that of “minority communities” which is increasingly inaccurate given that people of color are majority identities on a global level. That term has also been rejected for its potential to infer any inferior characteristics. The community may or may not also be a geographic community. Given that race is a socially-defined construct, the definitions of these communities are dynamic and evolve across time.

How the Unified Command Should Apply Equity in its Decision-Making

In order to ensure that we emerge from this crisis as a stronger Virginia, the HEWG has determined that every facet of the Unified Command response and recovery must apply an equity lens. This lens is of even greater imperative in light of the predicted implications and complications this unique public health crisis event will have on at-risk populations. Further, as a result of the catastrophic nature of the crisis, the demographic of those who identify as at-risk, under-resourced, and underserved will widen to those who traditionally never identified in these vulnerable ways. Therefore elevating the health equity lens in all parts of the response is as equally important as all functions of communications, policy, operations, logistics, planning, finance, and recovery. Further, the HEWG predicts that the impact of this public health crisis will be felt for years and perhaps for generations for communities that have historically been under resourced or underrepresented. (Curry-Stevens & Reyes, 2014).

Leading with an equity lens generally is commensurate with, but not limited to the following factors:

- **Governance and Procedural Equity** - Identified by broadening vertically and horizontally the diversity of those who are delegated for collaborative problem-solving and decision-making, which also includes a rejection of toxic and manipulative control or power;
 - **Resource Allocation and Placement** - The way in which resources and services are procured, promoted, and provided in proximity to those who most need or require them to survive or thrive. Measures of equality for resource allocation are not prioritized;
 - **Outcomes** - A descriptive and transparent synthesis of which population(s) or who survives or thrives, who is adversely impacted or resilient, who is affected by collateral or generational damage, and/or who is legally liable for a continuum of outcomes; and
 - **Solutions and Problem-Solving** - The extent to which solutions are intentionally transformative, justice-oriented, and liberating from the systemic and structural inequities and bias that are sustained by the dominant culture's ways of knowing and commitment to the status quo.
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- **HEWG Guiding Principles for the Unified Command:**
 - How have we ensured that our operational processes are inclusive, and that the elements of our processes have not created barriers to meaningful participation?
 - Which stakeholder groups would we like to have included but were unable to facilitate?
 - On the basis of social, physical and cultural variables, how does a process or decision accommodate for access limitations of various stakeholder groups?
 - How have we modified our processes to provide support, resources, and access by historically underrepresented community stakeholders?
 - How does our decision-making support the uplifting of communities historically most affected by inequities?
 - What types of biases have influenced the work of our groups and how have these been identified and addressed?
 - What improvements to team processes can we support for naming and identifying unaddressed bias?

The HEWG is structured using experiences from a myriad of Virginia stakeholders and includes ideas outlined in the framework: Curry-Stevens, A., Reyes, M.E. & Coalition of Communities of Color (2014). Protocol for culturally responsive organizations. Portland, OR: Center to Advance Racial Equity, Portland State University.

