

# 21<sup>st</sup> Century Public Health

## Emerging Initiative

### Strengthening Public Health and Health Care Partnerships for the Future



Progress on America's health has been challenging, despite access to better tools and capabilities to improve health than ever before. The United States has world-leading diagnostic tests, treatments, and vaccines; increasingly rich and interoperable electronic health data to help patients stay healthier; and many innovative efforts by health care organizations to strengthen primary and preventive care, including care provided at home. Yet, American life expectancy has declined and many health disparities have widened in recent years, alongside rising health care spending with growing challenges in affordability and access. Health care workers are also reporting more burnout and attrition than ever before.

It is time for a more collaborative path forward on improving the nation's health. In partnership with the National Academy of Medicine (NAM) and a leading set of multi-stakeholder collaborators, Duke-Margolis is working to outline a set of feasible, meaningful action steps across health care, public health, and community supports to improve our nation's capacity to help Americans stay healthy in the near term. These action steps advance the longer-term goal of bringing together public, private, and community organizations to strengthen the nation's public health capabilities in critical areas of population health need.



Duke-Margolis has also prioritized population-level strategies for specific disease areas (e.g., hepatitis C and Alzheimer's disease, comprehensive approaches for multi-illness fall respiratory viruses) for pioneering funders who want to advance health policy to strengthen public health programs, further the development of an interdisciplinary data infrastructure model that gives care organizations and communities real-time information they can act on together, support new student initiatives and scholarships, and expand Duke's community of health policy faculty and researchers to advance collaborative, accountable population health.

## Why This Work Matters

Recent reports have noted critical gaps in authority and resources for federal, state, and local public health agencies to fulfill their mission of preventing disease and advancing population health at the community level. In many ways, these gaps are not new: funding has largely been flat or negative for decades, and much of actual expenditures are for programs targeted to fill gaps in particular health care needs for uninsured and underinsured individuals with certain conditions, particularly infectious diseases. But in other areas, such as trust in public health, the challenges seem to be worsening.

Several other simultaneous trends increase the urgency of addressing these gaps, but also suggest opportunities for a new approach to support and leverage efforts of public health agencies and health care providers to improve population health, including:

- **Opportunity:** The continuing rise in biomedical capabilities to help address population health threats, including the deployment of repurposed treatments and development of targeted new treatments, the rapid development and large-scale production of multiple safe and effective vaccines for emerging health threats, and the capacity to deliver these interventions through comprehensive “test to treat” strategies
- **Challenge:** The gap between test to treat biomedical capabilities and their consistent impact on population health can be substantial across disease areas
- **Opportunity:** The development of partnerships between health care, public health, and other public and private entities to address population health challenges, including the collection of data to provide a comprehensive picture of the health of communities and populations in real time
- **Challenge:** The growth of health care resources has long outpaced those for traditional public health institutions. Public health care funding has been important to advance state and local data collection across disease surveillance and other public health-oriented data flows about community health risks. If paired with increasingly interoperable medical records, registries, and other health care data systems and advances in digital technologies and real-world evidence, public health care funding could further facilitate partnerships between public health and health care providers to intercept and address health risks earlier.
- **Opportunity:** Health care organizations are increasingly engaged in addressing social factors that create barriers to care and health, including food insecurity, inadequate housing, and other “non-medical” barriers to access, which could interdigitate with and augment social services and public health interventions at the state and local level if better coordinated.
- **Opportunity:** The federal government, state, employer, and other purchaser efforts are supporting payment and care reforms aiming to achieve better health care results through greater accountability for health not just excellence in traditional medical services.

Altogether, these trends could support a re-envisioning of how public health, health care, and social service systems can work together to address population health challenges. But there is not yet a systematic vision or strategy for whether and how these trends in health care capabilities and financing can best support public health goals, including addressing disparities in health and the downward trend in health outcomes across many population groups.

**It is time for a more collaborative path forward to improve the nation’s health.**

## Finding Solutions

In a May 2023 issue brief, Duke-Margolis authors, together with now CDC Director Mandy Cohen, outlined a path toward realizing these aims—Accountable Population Health, focused on more intentional partnerships between health care and public health to achieve population health goals.

Building from this, spring 2024 efforts have focused on practical, collaborative short-term action steps to address two key health challenges as proof of concept for amplifying concerted public health and health care actions across other major population health challenges:

- strengthening protections for individuals and communities from the complications and disruptions of respiratory infections
- preventing overdose deaths and other complications of opioid use disorder (OUD).

We have outlined how federal agencies can collaborate to support evidence-based, short-term actions largely with existing authorities. Our goal is measurable progress toward improving the nation’s health within the next 18 months and providing a foundation for further progress.