



**Statement for the Record**

**Submitted by Aligning for Health**

***“Empowered by Data: Legislation to Advance Equity and Public Health”***

**House Committee on Energy & Commerce, Subcommittee on Health**

**June 24, 2021**

Aligning for Health is pleased to submit this statement for the record and appreciates that Chairwoman Eshoo and Ranking Member Guthrie are holding this hearing to examine the importance of legislation to advance equity and public health.

Aligning for Health is an advocacy organization that brings together a broad coalition of members focused on improving health and wellbeing through interventions related to better aligning health and social needs. We are supported by an Advisory Board of individuals representing public health, mental health, housing, community development, human services, and many other sectors.

As a coalition, we work to develop and promote actionable policies that create opportunities - and remove challenges - for states and local governments, health care organizations, and non-health care organizations to work together to develop cross-sector, coordinated solutions to address both health and social needs.

We strongly support the Committee’s efforts to assess and discuss what actionable steps Congress can take now to improve access to, and the coordination of, public health, health care and social services. Improving data sharing and the delivery and coordination of care across public health, health care, and social service sectors will help to address upstream social factors, address unmet social needs, and improve health outcomes for all.

**Social Determinants Impact Health Outcomes and Drive Health Inequities**

There is a significant body of academic work showing that economic and social conditions have a powerful impact on individual and population health outcomes as well as health care costs. These non-clinical factors – such as housing, food assistance, income, employment status, education and transportation – have the potential to contribute to health outcomes more than clinical health care. In fact, one widely cited study found that while ten percent of premature deaths in the U.S. are due to clinical health care, social and environmental factors are estimated to account for sixty percent of health outcomes.<sup>1</sup> Meanwhile, the health and economic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic are far reaching but have had an outsized impact on many vulnerable and underserved communities.

**Importance of Cross-Sector Coordination**

States, local governments, health care providers, payers, social services providers, community-based organizations (CBOs), and others are increasingly seeking to partner to better coordinate care and

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<sup>1</sup> Hood, C. M., K. P. Gennuso, G. R. Swain, and B. B. Catlin. 2016. County health rankings: Relationships between determinant factors and health outcomes. *American Journal of Preventive Medicine* 50(2):129-135.



services. Meanwhile, many states are more deeply integrating social determinants of health strategies within their Medicaid programs, with help from the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services.<sup>2,3</sup>

However, one of the greatest challenges to high-impact interventions is the difficulty in navigating and coordinating fragmented and complex programs aimed at addressing health care needs, food insecurity, housing instability, workforce supports, and transportation reliability, among others. In particular, the siloed funding, data systems, and administration of many of these programs at the state and local, and nongovernmental levels create barriers to effective coordination and partnership.

The bipartisan **Social Determinants Accelerator Act (H.R. 2503)** will combine targeted technical assistance with grant funding to empower communities to develop Social Determinants Accelerator Plans. These Accelerator Plans will drive innovative, evidence-based interventions, coordinate resources, and identify barriers to integrated systems-level approaches to addressing both the health and social needs of families and individuals on Medicaid.

Additionally, the Social Determinants Accelerator Act would create an inter-agency technical advisory council on social determinants of health. The Council would include program experts from across the federal government, including the Department of Housing and Urban Development, the Department of Labor and the United States Department of Agriculture, as well as state and local government officials, the private sector and CBOs. This council would be well positioned to identify areas where the federal government is collecting and leveraging social determinants data, how federal funding is addressing health disparities, and coordinate the effective use of federal resources accordingly.

As the Committee discusses how Congress can advance health equity, we urge you to consider the Social Determinants Accelerator Act. This legislation is low-cost, ready to implement, and has the support of nearly 100 leading organizations.<sup>4</sup>

We also support the following bills being considered by the Subcommittee:

- The **Improving Social Determinants of Health Act of 2021 (H.R. 379)**, which would establish a social determinants of health program at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and would provide grants to public health agencies and CBOs to address social determinants of health.
- The **Social Determinants for Moms Act (H.R. 943)**, which would develop a strategy and coordinate federal efforts to understand and address social determinants of maternal health with respect to pregnant and postpartum individuals.
- The **Collecting and Analyzing Resources Integral and Necessary for Guidance (CARING) for Social Determinants of Health Act (H.R. 3894)**, which would require the Secretary of HHS to provide guidance and technical assistance to states on how to address social determinants of health through Medicaid and CHIP.

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<sup>2</sup> Kaiser Family Foundation, 2019. States Reporting Social Determinant of Health Related Policies Required in Medicaid Managed Care Contracts. Available here: <https://bit.ly/3wQXv7y>

<sup>3</sup> CMS. 2021. Opportunities in Medicaid and CHIP to Address Social Determinants of Health. Available here: <https://bit.ly/3y0ubvB>

<sup>4</sup>Aligning for Health, Social Determinants Accelerator Act. Available here: <https://bit.ly/35LtQR0>



## Importance of Collecting, Reporting, and Exchange of Health & Social Needs Data

As noted, the siloed way in which health care, public health, and social services are paid for and administered has limited cross-sector coordination and data sharing across organizations in the health and social service sectors. Breaking down the siloes and incentivizing connectivity and coordination between programs and systems will help to ensure that they are most effective in improving health and wellbeing.

Over the past few years, CMS and HHS have made strong investments and have taken significant steps to promote and require interoperability and exchange of health data. However, social services and CBOs have not benefitted from the same level of infrastructure and systems funding, and often experience difficulty in connecting with and sharing information with health care organizations.

Statewide or regional efforts to connect health care organizations and CBOs for purposes of electronic referrals, outcomes tracking, electronic resource directories, and care coordination help to bridge some of these gaps. Integrated network models like North Carolina's NCCARE360 bring together CBOs, private foundations, health care organizations, and technology vendors to provide a common point of connection and resources, alleviating the burden of multiple one-off connections and exchanges. Coordinated networks also provide users with greater insight on resource availability and allocation across health and social services providers.

The bipartisan **Leveraging Integrated Networks in Communities (LINC) to Address Social Needs Act (S. 509)**<sup>5,6</sup> would provide needed funding to states, through public-private partnerships, to catalyze, establish, and augment efforts to better connect and share information across sectors.

This one-time seed funding for states would facilitate cross-sector referrals, communication, service coordination and outcome tracking between social service providers and health care organizations by establishing or expanding secure, connected technology networks. States will have flexibility to design networks that are responsive to the unique cultures, infrastructure, and needs of their state. Funding can also be used to provide technical assistance and to support associated entities in connecting with and participating in the community integration network infrastructure, and to plan for and implement actions to create sustainable funding models to support the long-term success of the models.

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We strongly support the Committee's efforts to assess and discuss what actionable steps Congress can take now to improve access to, and the coordination of, public health, health care and social services to advance health equity.

Thank you for the opportunity to share our comments and perspective. Please contact Chris Adamec at [cadamec@aligningforhealth.org](mailto:cadamec@aligningforhealth.org) with any questions or if we can be a resource in any way.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> LINC to Address Social Needs Act, S. 509, available here: <https://bit.ly/3qsEO7F>

<sup>6</sup> Aligning for Health, LINC to Address Social Needs Act. Available here: <https://bit.ly/35NdqI2>

<sup>7</sup> Aligning for Health tracks all legislation related to social determinants of health and health equity, which are posted here: <https://bit.ly/35Qtqc9>