

THE HEALTH EQUITY AND ACCOUNTABILITY ACT

A Strategic and Comprehensive Approach to Eliminating Racial and Ethnic Health Disparities

History of the Health Equity and Accountability Act (HEAA)

The Health Equity and Accountability Act (HEAA) is a comprehensive, broadly-supported legislation to eliminate racial and ethnic health disparities. HEAA is the only legislation that holistically addresses health inequalities, their intersections with immigration status, age, disability, sex, gender, sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, language, and socio-economic status, along with obstacles associated with historical and contemporary injustices.

HEAA has been introduced by the Congressional Tri-Caucus, comprised of the Congressional Asian Pacific American Caucus (CAPAC), the Congressional Black Caucus (CBC), and the Congressional Hispanic Caucus (CHC), since 2007. In this 115th Congress, Senator Mazie Hirono and Representative Barbara Lee, with support from the Tri-Caucus, are sponsoring HEAA (H.R. 5942, Senate pending).

The Need to Address Health Equity

While national demographics are rapidly changing, racial and ethnic minority populations are expected to continue growing in the coming years, communities of color continue to face substantial cultural, social, and economic barriers to obtaining quality health care and achieving equitable health outcomes. Communities of color also experience poorer health statuses than their counterparts. Efforts to improve their health and the delivery of care have been limited by inadequate resources for funding, staffing, stewardship, and accountability.

Building on the Advancements of the Affordable Care Act (ACA) through HEAA

Health care advocates across the country applauded the passage of the Affordable Care Act (ACA) as the most significant advancement in support of the health of communities of color in the last 40 years. The ACA improved and extended health insurance coverage to millions of Americans, ended pre-existing condition exclusions, lifted lifetime caps on care, covered clinical preventive costs, and increased investments in public health and community-level prevention initiatives. Many policy initiatives in previous versions of HEAA, such as expanded Offices of Minority Health and health data collection standards, were passed as part of the ACA.

Since the ACA, the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) has developed Healthy People 2020, the National Stakeholder Strategy for Achieving Health Equity, National Partnership for Action to End Health Disparities, National Prevention Strategy, and National Quality Strategy as the nation's coordinated roadmap to reduce health disparities. Additionally, the enhanced National Standards for Culturally and Linguistically Appropriate Services (CLAS) and National HIV/AIDS Strategy (NHAS) are additional initiatives by HHS to prioritize the elimination of racial and ethnic health disparities. HEAA builds on these important efforts.

Scope of HEAA

HEAA is comprised of ten titles addressing a wide spectrum of health equity concerns. Each title contains many diverse, holistic policy options for addressing health disparities:

Title I: Data Collection and Reporting—Seeks to increase the precision, accuracy, and number of resources for the collection and reporting of health data.

Title II: Culturally and Linguistically Appropriate Health Care—Ensures patient access to high quality care by enhancing language access services and culturally competent care in the health care delivery system.

Title III: Health Workforce Diversity—Aims to create a pipeline and training opportunities for professional and allied health care workers that will allow them to more effectively serve communities of color.

Title IV: Improvement of Health Care Services—Removes harmful barriers to health insurance coverage while maximizing the positive impact of federal health care investments in communities of color.

Title V: Improving Health Outcomes for Women, Children, and Families—Addresses certain health disparities faced by women and children, and promotes programs supporting healthy family formation.

Title VI: Mental Health—Incorporates strategies to address mental and behavioral health issues affecting communities of color.

Title VII: Addressing High Impact Minority Diseases—Proposes focused approaches to combat diseases and conditions that have a disparate impact on racial and ethnic minorities, such as cancer, diabetes, and HIV/AIDS.

Title VIII: Health Information Technology—Ensures that underserved communities and communities of color benefit from rapid advances in health information technology (HIT) and new investments in HIT infrastructure that serve as the foundation for improving quality, efficiency, and outcomes as our health care system advances.

Title IX: Accountability and Evaluation—Strengthens HHS oversight to ensure programs continue to reduce health disparities.

Title X: Addressing Social Determinants and Improving Environmental Justice—Builds upon the ACA's historic investments in prevention to bolster primary and secondary prevention efforts and dedicates resources to communities striving to overcome negative social determinants.

Why HEAA?

While the ACA includes a number of provisions to reduce health disparities, additional investments must be made to fully achieve health equity. At a time when health care is under attack, we must continue to use our shared values to work toward a unified vision of fairness, justice, and equal opportunity. Through our collaborative work, we can better achieve a sustainable, cost-effective health care system without barriers that prohibit communities of color and other individuals from obtaining quality care and achieving equitable health outcomes.

HEAA Commands Broad Support

Health equity advocates, scholars and researchers, provider groups and associations, other professional groups, and organizations representing communities of color have contributed ideas and support to HEAA. Over 300 of these groups comprise the HEAA Community Working Group, dedicated to supporting the solutions advanced in HEAA. In addition, 158 members of Congress have sponsored HEAA in its years of existence, indicative of the broad support of policymakers in eliminating health disparities.