

Introduction

Supported by the **Robert Wood Johnson Foundation**, *Raising the Bar* provides an actionable framework for the entire healthcare sector to embed equity and excellence throughout its work. In this first part of the project the **National Alliance to impact the Social Determinants of Health** (NASDOH) convened extensive discussions with providers, hospitals, payers, and community leaders to develop foundational principles, essential roles, and concrete actions for the sector to help achieve optimal health for all. A second part, led by the National Partnership for Women & Families, is exploring more detailed guidance for maternal health.

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Raising the Bar: Healthcare's Transforming Role

“ Let us not return to what was normal,
but reach toward what is next.”

Amanda Gorman, National Youth Poet Laureate

We live in a time of historic unease and unrest. COVID-19 and the concurrent racial reckoning have highlighted the importance of health and equity to not only our personal aspirations but to our collective well-being as a society and economy. Healthcare has provided us with heroes, while also being overwhelmed and exhausted by the scope of the nation's healthcare needs.

The United States has many of the assets needed for a healthier nation, including wealth, committed health providers, and technology. And the healthcare field includes bright spots where innovative organizations are transforming the delivery of care and strengthening engagement with and service to communities.

But we can no longer ignore that the healthcare system, as it has evolved, is not delivering on key health goals, frustrates many of its participants, perpetuates inequities, and often fails those most in need. The COVID-19 pandemic and racial reckoning made long-standing issues in healthcare more visible. Dominant models remain grounded in misdirected incentives that prioritize volume over quality or outcomes, and on structures that sustain historic patterns of discrimination and neglect and tolerate continuing barriers to care. Transformation remains too slow and often focused on narrow fixes to the most visible problems.

Raising the Bar: Healthcare's Transforming Role aspires to a higher standard, based on a broad, coherent set of foundational principles that can guide transformation of healthcare organizations focused on equity and excellence. *Raising the Bar* seeks to show how healthcare stakeholders can undertake bold change, and in turn how healthcare can help improve the nation's health, equity, and well-being.

In this report, we outline how healthcare can use ALL of its tools and resources to raise the bar. We highlight organizations already working to raise the bar, provide resources to guide action, and call for ALL healthcare stakeholders—providers, practitioners, payers, and others—to join in this effort.

Why We're Raising the Bar (and Inviting You to Join Us)

Somava Saha, MD MS, *Founder and Lead, Well-being and Equity (WE) in the World*

This historic moment in time calls on us to raise the bar. As healthcare stewards – patients, payers, providers, hospitals, pharmacists, primary care, this is our commitment:

to raise the bar for ourselves,
for one another,
and for our collective nation,
to raise the bar to restore trust and trustworthiness
to restore soul, kindness and care into the practice and system of healthcare
to use our power and privilege to lift systems of oppression that harm us and hold back
our trapped and untapped potential
to lean into this moment to found a new system based on humanity and equity so that all
might reach their full potential to live their best lives and contribute to that of others.

In raising the bar, we free ourselves by seeing ourselves in each other. We free ourselves:

From fixing and rescuing to accompanying and supporting
From pay for performance to shared stewardship for equitable health and well-being
From a healthcare system in financial and spiritual crisis to a health system with possibility,
relationship, and abundance
From one which is blind to its role in perpetuating inequities to one which embraces its role
in creating justice
From savior and wounded to connected, healing, and growing together, in partnership
with patients, families, and communities.

This is our moment to build a legacy of a healthcare system for the future we can be proud
to leave for our children and grandchildren. This is why we raise the bar.

What is *Raising the Bar*?

Raising the Bar: Healthcare's Transforming Role is a framework and call to action for the healthcare sector to embrace all the levers, resources, and opportunities available to advance equity and excellence. It includes a set of foundational principles, essential roles, and concrete actions for the healthcare sector to pursue the primary goal of improving health and well-being while enabling all people to be treated with dignity and respect.

We intentionally set a high bar, recognizing that many in healthcare were already reaching for transformational change but that it would not be within easy reach of stakeholders. Our vision is that wide adoption of the *Raising the Bar* framework will lead to:

- Healthcare organizations and institutions that are all in: embracing the challenge of using all their power, capacity, and resources to achieve health equity; improving the care experience of individuals and families and furthering the health and well-being of communities.
- Healthcare stakeholders that lead the effort to achieve equity and excellence in their own organizations and communities, rather than waiting for broader systems change that may make transformation easier. Effective transformation requires acting within existing structures AND pursuing fundamental systems change.

- A common commitment from all healthcare stakeholders to identify and initiate transformative change: payers and policymakers that incentivize and support transformational actions; healthcare institutions and systems that adopt transformational change as part of their organizational culture; and individual providers and practitioners that embrace the opportunity to better serve individuals and their communities.
- Healthcare organizations and institutions that are connected to communities, partner to advance the community's interests, and are held accountable by communities.
- Healthcare organizations and institutions centered on achieving health equity and taking the extraordinary steps needed to address historic and current patterns of racism and discrimination at the clinical, community, and national level.
- Healthcare organizations and institutions that meet the moment by providing high quality, accessible, comprehensive, and integrated care with dignity and respect.
- Healthcare organizations and institutions that rebuild and recover from COVID-19, recognizing the challenges faced by people who experience inequity every day (even before COVID-19), and commit to building resilient and sustainable systems that better serve individuals, families, and communities.

MISSION

**Commit Above All
to a Mission of
Improving Health
and Well-being**

COMMUNITY

**Serve the
Community
as an Engaged,
Responsive,
and Proactive
Partner**

TRUST

**Earn and
Sustain
Trusting
Relationships**

EQUITY

**Systematically
Pursue Health Equity,
Racial Justice, and
the Elimination of
All Forms of
Discrimination**

POWER

**Share and
Effectively Use
Resources,
Influence,
and Power**

Why Focus on Healthcare?

"Healthcare" exists in a broader ecosystem responsible for generating and maintaining health. This ecosystem includes those directly engaged in the delivery or payment of care, public health and social services organizations, and many other stakeholders in the community that influence economic and social well-being. Healthcare is neither solely responsible for nor capable of achieving health and well-being; this must be a multi-sector effort.

Healthcare, though, has a central role to play in transformation:

- Healthcare constitutes a fifth of the US economy.¹ Though evidence shows that health is generated by a broader ecosystem, 97 percent of our health dollars are spent on care and treatment.² To achieve a more integrated and effective system of health, we must address healthcare's significant role in the broader ecosystem, and healthcare actors must be agents for change.
- Healthcare organizations have stature, power, and influence locally and nationally which can be harnessed for positive change. Healthcare organizations, whether that be providers, payers, and other vendors, are often the most influential institutions in their communities because of their standing or their economic impact. As such, they have significant political and social influence on healthcare policy, and on broader public policies which affect the conditions in which people live, work, learn, play, and pray, or the social determinants of health.³
- Healthcare providers offer vital care to individuals and, by raising the bar, can help people and their communities become healthier. Most people interact with the healthcare system from birth to the end of life, and many times in between. Those interactions can provide vital connections, guidance, and life-saving care. Healthcare should be a positive force for individuals, as well as for the communities that need their service. But for too many, this is not the case.
- Payers and providers increasingly have incentives to support stronger prevention and engagement at the community level, particularly as healthcare systems transition to risk-sharing models. In many respects, those paying for healthcare must finance the treatment for severe illnesses that could have been prevented. These incentives and realities should be leveraged to improve health outcomes and reduce health inequities.
- Many healthcare organizations are mission-driven, with the ability to align equity and social justice imperatives with their mission. They are in a prime position to lead change in healthcare as in broader society.

'Healthcare' or 'healthcare stakeholders' are used extensively in the *Raising the Bar* Principles, Roles, and Actions. These terms are used to refer to those that pay for, organize, and deliver medical and health services, and can adopt and implement the *Raising the Bar* framework to improve equity and excellence in healthcare. For example:

- Care providers, including single clinicians or professional staff, provider groups, hospitals, hospital systems
- Mental and behavioral health providers
- Community health centers
- Public and private payers
- Integrated delivery systems
- Vendors and partners who aid in care and case management, and facilitate the delivery and payment of physical, mental, behavioral, and social care and services

1 "2020 National Health Expenditure (NHE) Fact Sheet," Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS), December 15, 2021, <https://www.cms.gov/Research-Statistics-Data-and-Systems/Statistics-Trends-and-Reports/NationalHealthExpendData/NHE-Fact-Sheet>.

2 "Health Expenditure and Financing Data," The Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD), accessed April 22, 2022, <https://stats.oecd.org/Index.aspx?DataSetCode=SHA#>

3 "Social Determinants of Health," World Health Organization, accessed April 15, 2022, https://www.who.int/health-topics/social-determinants-of-health#tab=tab_1. "Social Determinants of Health: Know What Affects Health," Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), September 3, 2021, <https://www.cdc.gov/socialdeterminants/index.htm> "Beyond Health Care: New Directions to a Healthier America," Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, April 1, 2009, <https://www.rwjf.org/en/library/research/2009/04/beyond-health-care.html>

- All healthcare actors have an opportunity, and obligation, to improve health equity and address structural and systemic harms. Racism and discrimination are pervasive in all sectors, and these broad structural and systematic harms have been embedded and perpetuated in healthcare. We observe the manifestation of these harms in payment and delivery systems that treat individuals differently by race or income, provide substandard care for many in greatest need, and are insensitive to cultural needs.
- This work is already underway in forward thinking and innovative organizations, but more action is needed. We offer examples of “bright spots” where healthcare organizations and institutions are already putting these principles into practice. But transformation is slow, uneven, and more can be done to ensure that culture, policy, and payment encourages uptake. Healthcare can commit to taking action to raise the bar now and simultaneously advocate for systems change.

Why Now?

Over the course of this project, we have worked with those who deliver, partner with, receive, and pay for healthcare. Overwhelmingly, we heard frustrations with the current healthcare system, including that we have settled for poor results for our investments.

- Patients are frustrated by systems that fail to treat them with dignity and respect, are frequently difficult or impossible to access, and often deliver fragmented care. These challenges are exacerbated for individuals and communities that face the greatest challenges—people of color, people with disabilities, women, and all people who experience discrimination—who often report feeling unseen, unwelcome, or disrespected.
- Hospitals and other healthcare practitioners work uphill against payment systems that incentivize and reward high-volume, encounter-based treatment rather than integrated, patient-centered care focused on prevention and well-being.
- Payers and integrated systems lack capacity, incentives, or dedicated financing to fully address social determinants of health at the community level.
- Community-based organizations, human and social service organizations, and public health organizations face challenges in forming trusted, co-equal partnerships and aligning priorities and initiatives with healthcare organizations to improve health overall.

Unfortunately, these frustrations are not new. Long-standing structural and systemic issues within healthcare were known, but their impacts have been magnified by the COVID-19 pandemic and the racial reckoning that moved front and center into the public’s consciousness in 2020 and 2021. These events further exposed the ongoing weaknesses of our system and brought much needed attention to the disparities that so many in our nation face daily. This underscores the imperative to confront the root causes of inequity—racism, distrust, and fragmentation—and adds an urgency to recognize the current system is not effective in improving health and well-being, and repairs are needed to heal the healthcare system itself.

Raising the Bar: Healthcare's Transforming Role is long overdue but is launching at a critical time for healthcare. We hope that *Raising the Bar* illuminates a path forward—a place for some to start, or a roadmap for others to accelerate progress—to support all healthcare stakeholders in advancing equity and excellence regardless of where they are currently on their journeys.



We have to meet this moment to see that our healthcare system has equity by design and is committed to be an antiracist health system. We heard a groundswell of support for equity efforts by all healthcare stakeholders—including those who purchase, pay for, and deliver care. Adopting the *Raising the Bar* framework and committing to the concrete action outlined provides healthcare a path forward. We urge healthcare leaders to join this important effort to improve health and well-being for people and communities and truly raise the bar for equity and excellence.”

Dr. Karen DeSalvo, *Raising the Bar* Stewardship Council Co-Convener, NASDOH Co-Convener, Former Acting Assistant Secretary for Health, Former National Coordinator for Health IT

The Path Forward: What Can You Do to Raise the Bar?

Healthcare can lead the way with a commitment to *Raising the Bar*'s principles and by taking the concrete actions described in this report.

- **Make a commitment.** We call upon leaders in healthcare—institutions, clinicians, payers—to make a commitment to incorporate the *Raising the Bar* framework in their organizational strategy and practice. For some, this is a starting point in the journey toward the system we need. For the many already seeking or making transformational change, it is an opportunity for further and sustained efforts to raise the bar and accelerate change.
- **Share or adapt our framework for your networks.** We also encourage others to adapt or refine the *Raising the Bar* framework for their own unique circumstances, and to help carry this work forward in their own networks. At rtbhealthcare.org, you can learn more about how many are already responding to this call.
- **Take immediate action while seeking broader changes.** Finally, we emphasize the importance of taking immediate and constructive steps while participating in broader efforts to reform public and private payment systems. Healthcare can both lead the effort to improve the experience of individuals and communities now, while simultaneously advocating for broader systems change that will make this transformation sustainable.
- **Watch for detailed maternal health guidance.** Part Two of the *Raising the Bar* project focuses on applying the *Raising the Bar* Principles and Actions to maternal health. This guidance will be available at rtbhealthcare.org in early 2023.

Findings and Resources: Navigating This Report

The heart of this report is the five overarching *Raising the Bar* Principles. These principles represent our vision for a healthcare system committed to excellence and equity. These foundational principles apply to all those involved in paying for and delivering care, and represent the aspirations of individuals, families, and communities as they engage with healthcare systems.

In [Foundational Principles](#) and [Framework in Practice: Bright Spots](#), we define these principles and provide examples of healthcare organizations leading transformation by putting them into practice.

In the chapter's outlining the *Raising the Bar* Roles, [Employer Role](#), [Provider Role](#), [Partner Role](#), [Advocate Role](#), we define four essential roles for healthcare—and provide concrete actions within these roles that transform the healthcare system. Organizations committed to raising the bar can look to specific examples of how their peers have implemented these actions. We also provide a place to start or to accelerate existing efforts, with a curated set of resources and tools related to each role for healthcare. These resources are also consolidated in [Resources](#) along with a number of resources that apply to multiple roles.

The Principles, Roles, and Actions in this framework result from an intentionally and deeply co-creative process grounded in the perspectives of people with lived experience of inequities, the realities that healthcare leaders are facing, and the opportunities seen in the examples of transforming systems. The work was undertaken by a coalition of partners led by the National Alliance to impact the Social Determinants of Health and guided by two Councils to ensure broad and diverse input. Those partners, advisors, and our process are described in

[Our Partners and Process](#).



**Raising
the Bar**
Healthcare's Transforming Role

2022