

# Words Matter:

## How to Advance Racial Equity Through Specific and Intentional Policy Language

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American  
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[voicesforhealthykids.org](https://voicesforhealthykids.org) | [@voices4hk](https://twitter.com/voices4hk)





## WHO WE ARE

Voices for Healthy Kids  
works around the country  
to improve or create  
equitable policies that  
will make the places kids,  
live, learn, and play  
healthier.



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# Then & Now

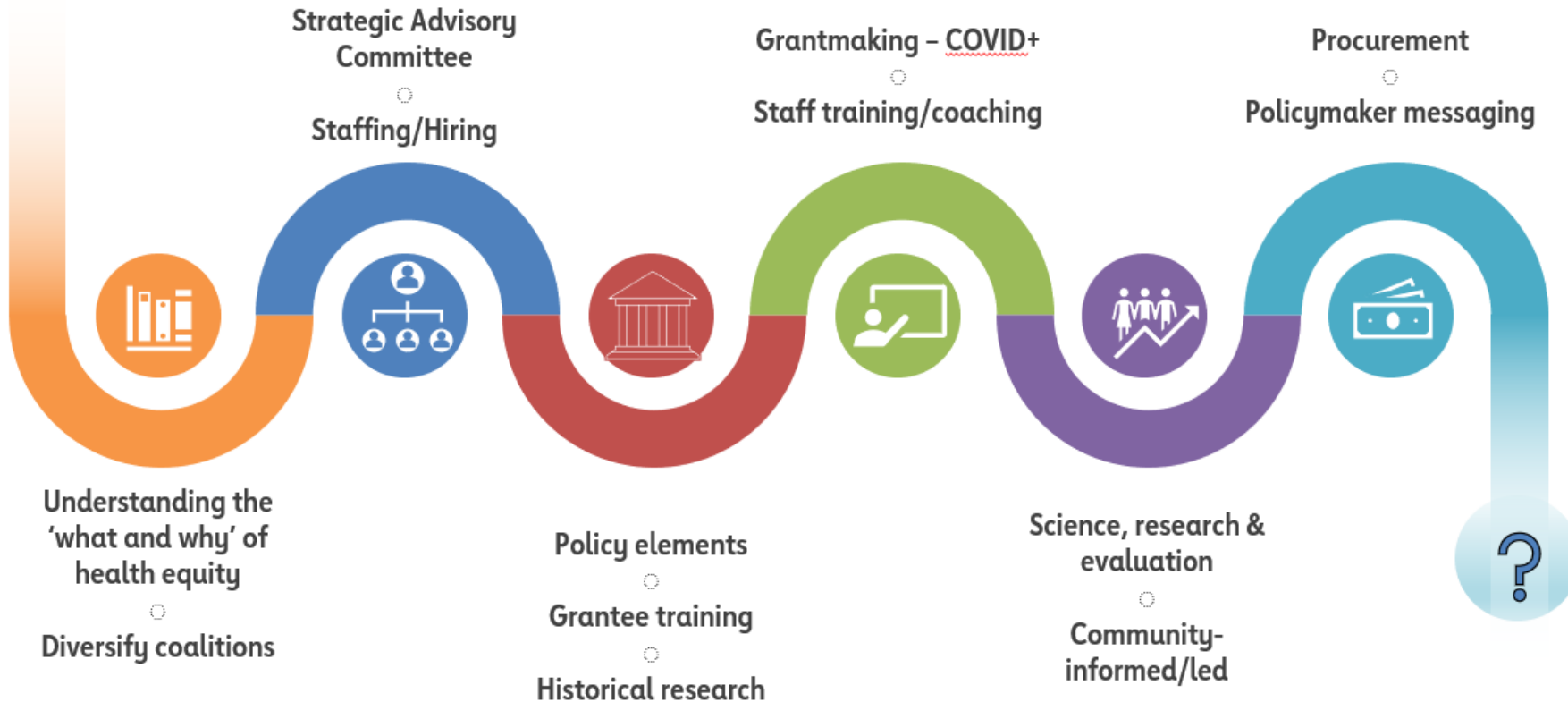


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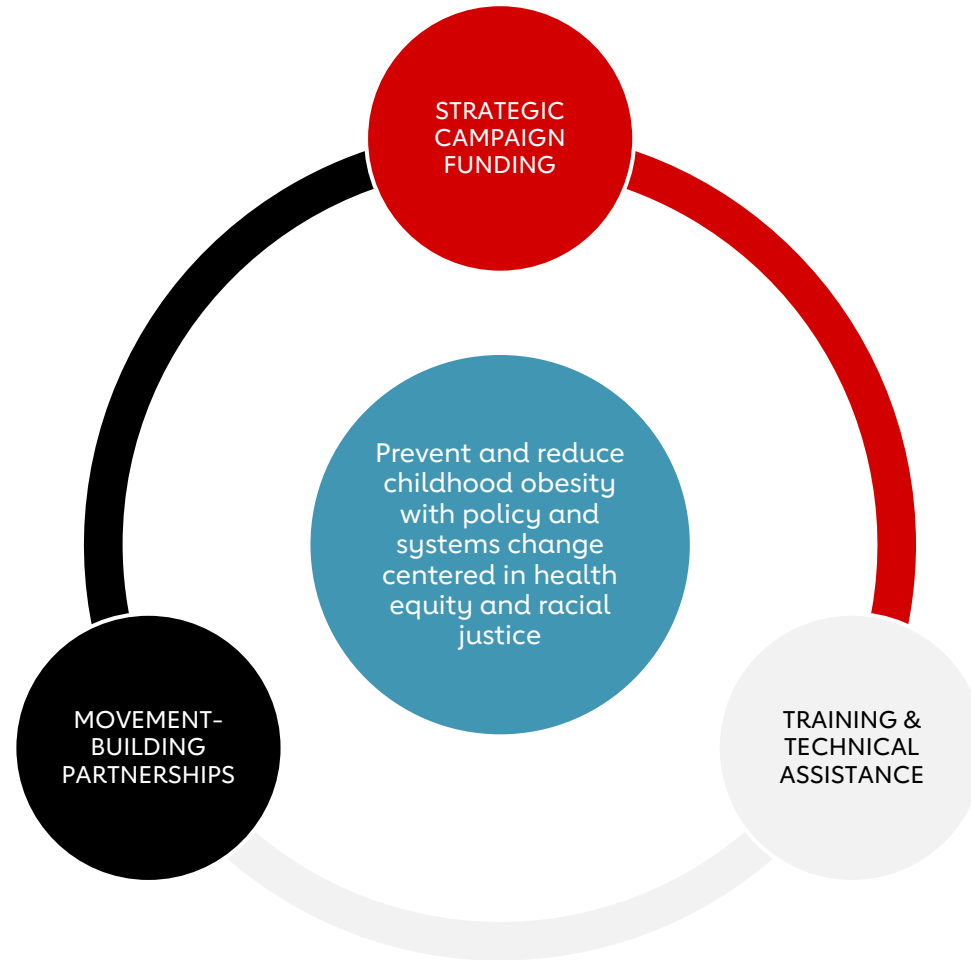
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# Voices for Healthy Kids Equity Evolution: 2013-2021



# Our Structure



# Voices Policy Agenda: State, Tribal, and Local

FY2021 - 2022

## Sugary Drinks/Healthy Hydration

- Sugary Drink Taxes
- Healthy Restaurant Meals
- Water Access in Schools

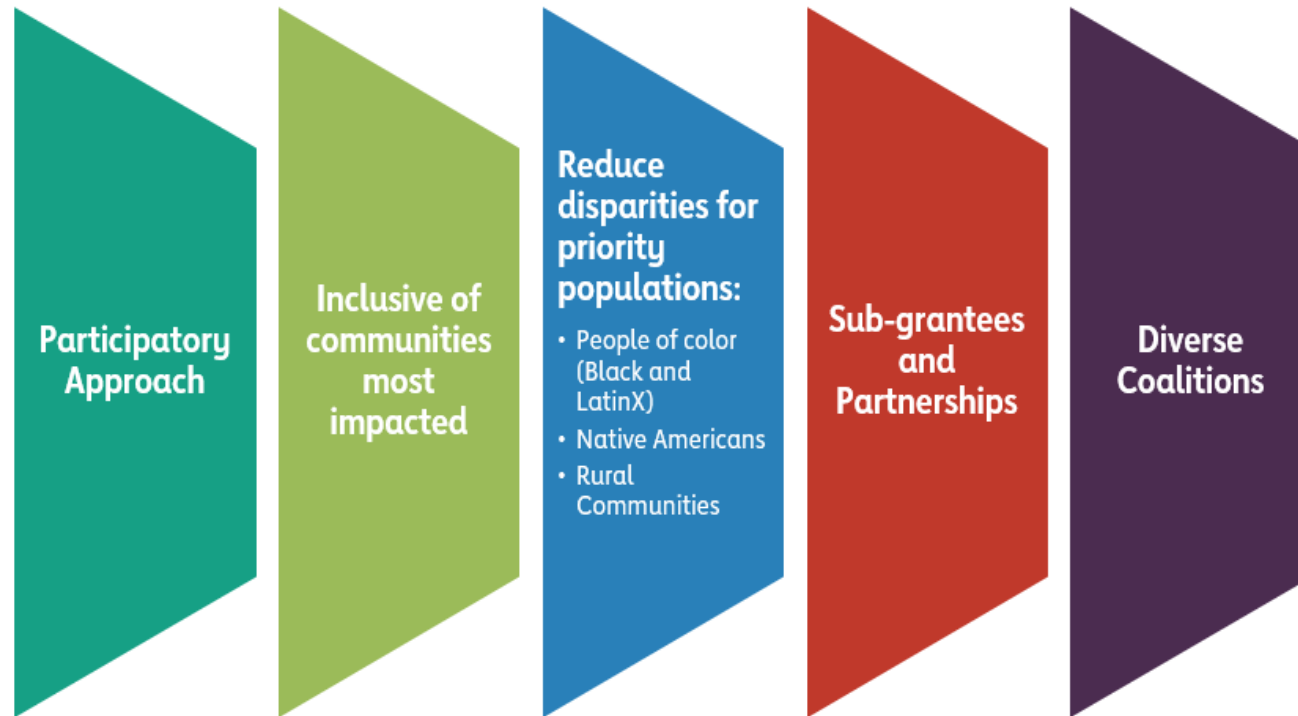
## Family and Nutrition Supports

- SNAP Access & Incentives
- Healthy School Foods
- Early Head Start/Head Start Access
- Early Care and Education Access & Standards

## Preemption

**Under Development:** Access to WIC, Community Water Access, Healthy School Meals for All

# Our Health Equity Values





# THE JOURNEY

buckle up and go



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# Racial Equity in Public Policy



# A Tale of Two Messaging Guides



Shift *from*  
"safe"  
conversations  
that avoid  
specific words  
on racial  
equity ...  
... to overt  
discussion about  
the need for  
policies that  
advance racial  
equity with clear  
words.



# Equality



# Equity



# Helpful Definitions

- **Racial equity:** The condition that would be achieved if one's racial identity no longer predicted how one fares.
- **Structural racism (also referred to as institutional or system racism):** Normalization and legitimization of dynamics that routinely advantage white people while producing cumulative and chronic adverse outcomes for people of color.



# Structural Racism + Policy

Structural racism and public policy can go hand-in-hand.

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## Goals:

1. Advance the conversation on racial equity.
2. Link racial inequity and systemic racism to policy.
3. Obtain specific racial equity language in policy.



# Share:

Policies that uphold  
structural racism

-OR-

Policies that break  
down structural  
racism



# Developing the Messages

- Start point messages
  - Prior research + AHA and grantees + our direction
  - Talked more overtly about structural racism
- Tested and evolved with staff, grantees and partners
  - Messages and support needed



# Messaging Guide Research and Development

## External Testing

- 1:1 interviews
- Online survey w/ 102 policymakers & insiders
  - Half former electeds, half policy insiders + influencers
  - 50% D, 14% R, 36% I
  - 21% Northeast, 13% Midwest, 19% West, 48% South
  - People of color/Indigenous (25%), white (69%), unspecified (7%); Hispanic ( 5%)
  - 61% male, 36% female
  - Ages 25-44 (26%), 45-64 (56%), 65+ (16%)



# Segmenting Our Audience

**May be more ready for direct conversations about racial equity**

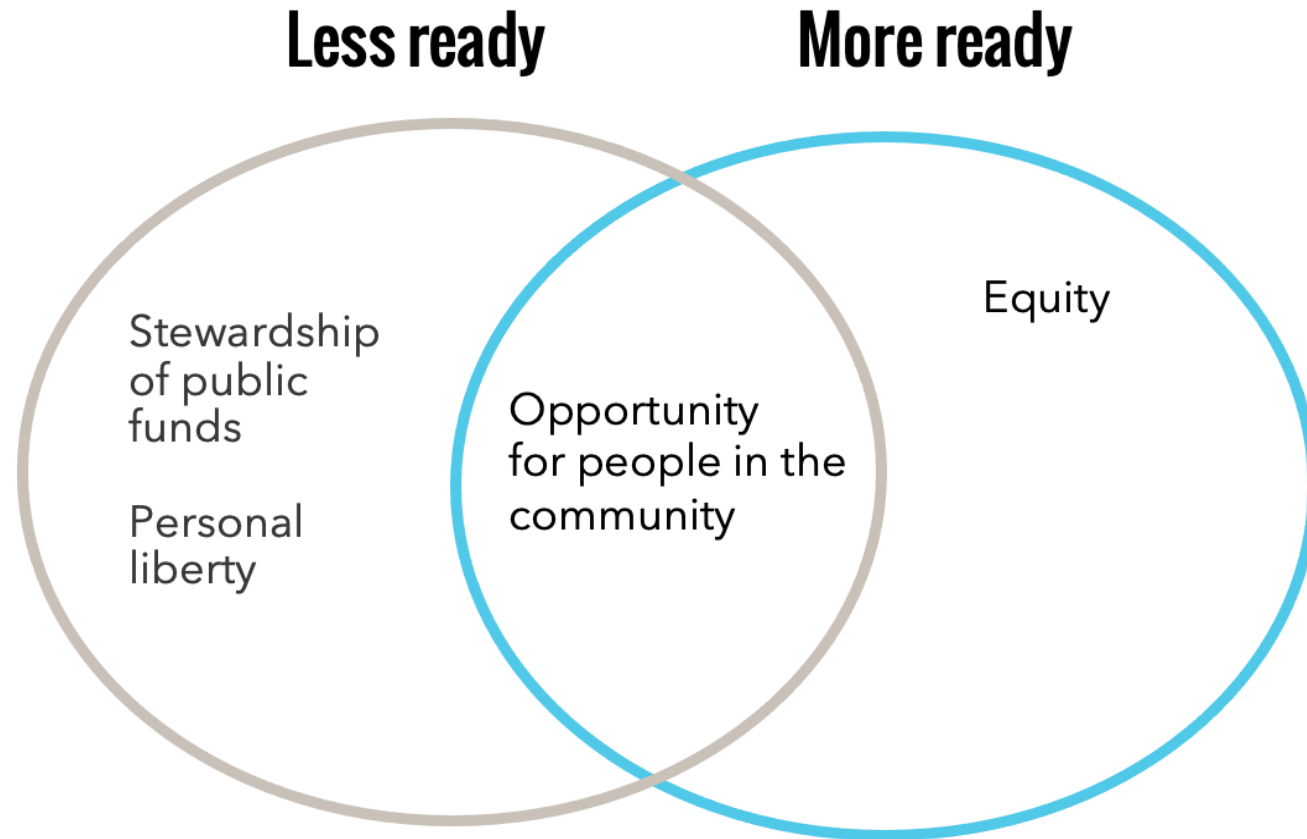
- Progressives and most independents
- See systemic racism as a problem

**May be less ready for direct conversations about racial equity**

- Lean conservative
- Do not see systemic racism as a problem



# Values Matter





Less Ready	More Ready
We will know that we have achieved health and racial equity when race can no longer be used to predict health, well- being and longevity.	Policies—past and present—influence the physical, economic, cultural and social environments of communities. They often have different and unjust outcomes in [ <i>communities of color and Indigenous communities, in both urban and rural areas*</i> ], including poorer health, lower income, higher medical costs, and limited opportunities for social, economic and financial advancement.
Policies—past and present—influence the physical, economic, cultural and social environments of communities. They often have different and unjust outcomes in [ <i>communities of color and Indigenous communities, in both urban and rural areas*</i> ], including poorer health, lower income, higher medical costs, and limited opportunities for social, economic and financial advancement.	New policies cannot undo the damage of structural racism and ongoing discrimination, but they can advance health and prevent future harm.
When people make decisions about their health—or the health of their children—we should be sure that policies do not limit their options and opportunities. We need to recognize and address the ways in which policies impact communities differently.	When people make decisions about their health—or the health of their children—we should be sure that policies do not limit their options and opportunities. We need to recognize and address the ways in which policies impact communities differently, especially those most affected by structural racism.
Together with the ( <i>insert specific</i> ) communities, we have an opportunity to make this policy most effective by prioritizing action where it will meet the greatest need, and by working with the communities to specify how it should be implemented.	Together with the ( <i>insert specific</i> ) communities, we have an opportunity to take a step toward racial equity with this policy by prioritizing action in communities where structural racism limits options and leads to worse health outcomes and by working with the communities to specify how it should be implemented.
The policy language needs to specify ...	The policy language needs to specify ...
Let's continue this conversation and learn together. We can go even farther by intentionally creating policies that do not continue giving white people advantages not offered to communities of color. We can help.	We are committed to having direct conversations about racial equity—it's as important to us as advancing the policies themselves. We have research-based messages that we're using with other decision-makers who are less ready for these conversations. How might we work together to make racial equity a prominent part of this policy conversation?

# Most Compelling Proof Points

More ready – The COVID-19 pandemic showed that disparities in health, economic and social conditions put people of color at much higher risk of illness and death than white people.

Less ready – For generations—and continuing today—the life expectancy for people of color has often been a decade or more shorter.



# Most Compelling Proof Points – Continued

Even within the working poor, people of color are at a greater disadvantage. At every income level, people of color have worse health outcomes than others at the same income level.

A global bank estimates that systemic racism faced by Black people over the last 20 years has cost the U.S. economy \$16 trillion, including gaps in wages, access to housing and higher education and investment in Black-owned businesses.

Historically policies have placed people of color at significant disadvantage by denying education, mortgages, loans, and health benefits provided to white people.



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# CUSTOMIZING THE MESSAGE

Listen for how this message adapts if we're talking about sugary-drink taxes.

Follow along on page 10-11.



Policies—past and present—influence the physical, economic, cultural and social environments of communities. They often have different and unjust outcomes in [*communities of color and Indigenous communities, in both urban and rural areas*], including poorer health, lower income, higher medical costs, and limited opportunities for social, economic and financial advancement.

- **Add Sugary Proof Points – Zoning for grocery stores; Kids drink 30 gallons of sugary drinks per year – enough to fill a bathtub; Sugary drinks are disproportionately advertised to Black and Latino communities.**
- **Policy can play a role here – Sugary drink tax can put resources into communities hardest hit by the health impacts...**

New policies cannot undo the damage of structural racism and ongoing discrimination, but they can advance health and prevent future harm.



# CUSTOMIZING THE MESSAGE, continued

Listen for how this message adapts if we're talking about sugary-drink taxes.

Follow along on page 10-11.



When people make decisions about their health—or the health of their children—we should be sure that policies do not limit options and opportunities.

- **With the tax, we'll support parents efforts to choose healthier drinks for their kids.**
- **But we can go farther. We can use this policy to increase healthy options and opportunities – based on needs identified by community members.**

Together with the **[Latino]** communities, we have an opportunity to take a step toward racial equity with this policy.

- **The policy language needs to specify ... Prioritize action in communities where structural racism has led to poor health outcomes... tax revenue put resources into Latino communities hardest hit by sugary drink related diseases... revenue will address community needs...**

I know you'll need to speak with others about this idea. We have research-based messages that we're using with other decision-makers who are less ready for these conversations. **How might we work together to help build support for a sugary drink tax?**



# Further Research Needed

**There are no people of color in my district.**

- This population is often rendered invisible
- 20% of rural America is non-white





Questions?



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