

FUNDING
OPPORTUNITY
ANNOUNCEMENT

Shifting narratives

Changing the
stories we tell
to create healthier
communities



Health Forward
FOUNDATION

OPPORTUNITY OVERVIEW

Health Forward Foundation is pleased to announce an open funding opportunity for organizations working to uplift community through storytelling. This funding will support efforts that share asset-based narratives — stories that highlight the strengths, talents, and resources within communities — to reshape harmful narratives that contribute to racial, economic, and health inequities.

To support this work, we will award a total of \$1 million in funding, across multiple organizations, for a 12-month period.

As part of this funding opportunity, applicants will be expected to show how they will integrate the **Healthy Communities Message Manual**, developed in partnership with [Hattaway Communications](#), into their proposed work. This research-based guide is a tool to help you talk about racism, class, place, and health in ways that connect with people and inspire action and is intended to be additive and complementary to your work. It provides clear, tested language and messaging strategies to strengthen your outreach, storytelling, and advocacy efforts. It's a core tool to help align messaging across the collective efforts of recipients of this award.

In your application, we want to hear how you'd use the **Healthy Communities Message Manual** to help change how people understand equity, economic opportunity, race, and health. We are especially interested in ideas that foster understanding, bring people together, dispel misinformation and overgeneralized stereotypes, elevate health as more than just an individual concern, and help move our prioritized communities of focus toward a healthier, more just future.

An in-depth discussion about the **Healthy Communities Message Manual** took place at our pre-application workshop on August 20. A recording of the workshop will be available on our website.

BUILDING THE HEALTHY COMMUNITIES MESSAGE MANUAL

We knew from the start that our work wouldn't be effective without centering voice and redistributing power to achieve impact. That's why the **Healthy Communities Message Manual** was created with input from our partners and community members through surveys, focus groups, and interviews.

By listening deeply and building collectively, we're working toward a more inclusive and impactful path forward.

KEY INFORMATION

Strategy

Shape community understanding around racial equity and economic inclusion as a pathway to health equity

Pre-application workshop

Wednesday, Aug. 20, 2025

Application deadline

By noon on Thursday, Sept. 25, 2025

Award type

We anticipate that most awards will be unrestricted — funding our partners can use however they see fit. However, in some cases, Health Forward may require that an award be restricted in purpose. Applications will be evaluated, and funding will be awarded on a case-by-case basis.

Award amounts

There is no set average funding amount for this funding opportunity. A total of \$1 million has been budgeted for distribution in various amounts across all organizations funded through this opportunity.

We anticipate awarding funding to 8-12 organizations. Awarded amounts will be based on the request and work described by the applicant.

Award type

Open funding

Open funding means we set funding criteria, publicly release a call for applications, and organizations can choose to apply. These opportunities are instrumental in achieving specific outcomes within our purpose areas.

Our purpose driven approach

Our work is guided by our [strategic purpose areas](#) of People, Power, Place, and Platform and our policy agenda. This funding opportunity seeks to reshape the way people understand and talk about racial, economic, and health equity.

Connect with us before you apply!

Would you like to connect with us?

[Request a consultation](#) on our website. We are available to discuss your work — and encourage you to do so — before you submit your basic application. We especially encourage organizations who are new to Health Forward to seek a consultation prior to application submission.

HOW STORIES CONNECT TO HEALTH

People understand and remember the world through stories. We all use them to make sense of information, guide our decisions, and form judgments. The stories we hear and share are the building blocks of broader narratives. These narratives invoke feelings and influence our beliefs and attitudes toward different communities. They form a “cultural common sense” that guides our perceptions, understandings, and actions.

These stories don’t just affect our personal views — they shape the laws and policies that govern our society. They shape who we deem qualified for access, opportunities, and resources which drive public policy and budgetary decisions. And those policies have a direct and lasting impact on our health.

The problem is that many of these stories are inaccurate. Worse, they can be harmful — fueling stereotypes, misunderstanding, and misinformation. Too often, people of color and those living in rural areas aren’t given the power to shape these narratives, even though they’re most affected by them.



Examples of how some mainstream narratives in American society can impact health include:

Pull yourself up by your bootstraps: Success is solely a product of personal effort, grit, and determination.

This harmful dominant narrative reinforces that our health is the result of our personal and individual activity and responsibilities, rather than the result of many factors often outside of our individual self-control.

Research shows [80 percent](#) of our health outcomes are shaped by social, economic, and behavioral factors such as our access to education, employment, good wages, family and social support, and people experience many barriers to health in their daily lives. Only the remaining 20 percent of our health outcomes are linked to access to quality clinical care. This harmful narrative ignores systemic inequalities and barriers to health and justifies gutting safety nets and blames people for being sick—ignoring racism, poverty, and trauma.

One harmful sub-narrative that reinforces the harmful dominant bootstraps narrative could include: **“If you just work hard enough, racism won’t hold you back.”**

This harmful sub-narrative suggests discrimination is irrelevant if you just push through. But the truth is that even as Black wealth has increased, [the Black-white wealth gap has persisted](#) for a myriad of systemic reasons.

The United States is the greatest country on earth — everything we do is superior to everyone else.

This harmful dominant narrative reinforces that U.S. health care is the best — so no need to change. It blocks proven solutions like universal coverage and masks deadly disparities, especially for Black, Indigenous, Latino, and low-paid people.

In reality, the United States has the [worst-performing health system](#) among all high-income countries. Across 70 performance indicators spanning five categories — access to care, health outcomes, administrative efficiency, care processes, and equity — the United States ranked last overall. It also placed last or second-to-last in four of these five categories when compared to nine other high-income nations.

One harmful sub-narrative that reinforces the harmful dominant American exceptionalism narrative could include: **“Our health care is the most advanced — other countries come to us for treatment.”**

This harmful sub-narrative overlooks the millions without adequate care and poorer public health outcomes [compared to peer nations](#).

Some people are more worthy of help and assistance than others.

This harmful dominant narrative enforces that help should only go to the “right kind” of low-paid people — those seen as working hard, sober, grateful, and physically and mentally able. It punishes people for being sick, unemployed, unhoused, or lacking the authorized immigration status. It contributes to racialized barriers to care, shrunken safety nets, and health disparities for those living at the margins.

This is an area where racism and white supremacy continue to exert their most damaging effects — deepening longstanding patterns of racial exclusion that both [block access to eligibility](#) for public programs and [impose harsh penalties](#) on those working to overcome systemic barriers.

One harmful sub-narrative that reinforces the harmful dominant narrative about deserving or undeserving people could include:
“Welfare queens just take advantage of the system — help should go to people who are trying to help themselves.”

This harmful sub-narrative frames some recipients, often racialized as Black women ([even though the biggest group of welfare program participants are white](#)) as lazy and undeserving, reinforcing the idea that only the “right” kind of poor person merits support. Even within this worldview, government aid is seen as acceptable — but only for those who fit narrow, moralized, and sometimes racist standards of worthiness.





WHAT TO EXPECT FROM THE HEALTHY COMMUNITIES MESSAGE MANUAL

What we learned

To better understand how people in our region see health, opportunity, and community, we listened to the stories of people in the communities we serve. What we heard reveals the beliefs, emotions, and lived experiences that shape how people engage or hold back. These insights help guide the way toward stronger, more inclusive narratives.

Themes from what we heard:

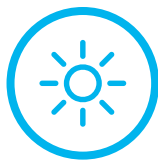
- **Hometown pride powers a shared vision of care and contribution.** There is a collective pride in our community that fuels a deep care for one another — and a shared goal to build a community where care and connection make it possible for all to live well.
- **Connection to communities spark action, but fear holds some people back.** People share a desire for connection, but fear, distrust, and misinformation can hold many back. Those who feel connected are optimistic about what they can do for their community and are ready to act.
- **Individuals need help shifting their mindsets from “my health” to “our health.”** People want to see their neighborhoods healthy and strong but feel powerless to address the systemic challenges holding people back. They are unsure of how to help so they focus on managing their own health rather than influencing change at the systems level.
- **People desire security for all but recognize it’s a reality for only some.** Kansas Citians and nearby rural communities see a healthy community as more than just access to health care — it’s about safety, stability, and everyone having a fair shot. But they also recognize that not everyone in their community experiences that reality today.

Central narrative
framework we will
be working around



Big City Energy with Small Town Care

In a region known for big-city energy and small-town care, people here show up for their families, their communities, and each other.



Building a Healthy Life Together

Across the region, we're building something meaningful together: a healthy life where each of us can live well, feel safe, and know we belong. When people have connection, care, and access to what they need, our whole community is healthy and no one gets left behind.



Health Isn't Ours to Solve Alone

Health doesn't begin and end at the clinic—and it isn't ours to solve alone. Our health is shaped by where we live, who we're connected to, and what's within reach, from good housing to fresh food. But too often, people are left to figure it out by themselves.



A Role to Play at Every Level

Healthy communities don't just happen; they are made by people who care. We build them, whether it's organizing for safe housing, checking in on a neighbor, or helping someone find access to healthy food. Every act of care, big or small, adds up to a stronger, more connected region.

Who we can move with narrative change efforts

While everyone is impacted by narratives, we grouped the people we interviewed into segments based on their awareness of racial and health equity issues and their level of community involvement. These three groups show the greatest potential to be moved by our collective work.

The central message in the **Healthy Communities Message Manual** was designed and tested with these three audiences in mind. Some people from Health Forward's [communities of focus](#) fall within these segments, but not everyone will. These audiences represent the people most open to joining the movement for health equity and systems change in the Kansas City region.*

Each segment includes a mix of people across race, gender, geography, and political views to reflect the broader community.

The segments are as follows:

Disconnected Champions

participate in community efforts from time to time and strongly acknowledge racism in their community.

Their views of community:

- They aspire to a community that is welcoming and inclusive for all and free from discrimination
- The majority strongly agree that some people experience barriers because of what they look like and where they live
- The majority strongly disagree that everyone in their community is free from discrimination, and everyone has access to safe and affordable housing and affordable, quality health care

Connected Acknowledgers

actively participate in community efforts and somewhat acknowledge racism in their community.

Their views of community:

- They aspire to strong family values, strong small businesses, and a quality education system
- They value close-knit, supportive, and inclusive environments in their community
- Some strongly agree that some people experience barriers because of what they look like and where they live
- Some strongly agree that everyone feels safe and secure, is included in democracy and civic life, and has the same opportunity to be successful in life

Disconnected

Acknowledgers participate in community efforts from time to time and somewhat acknowledge racism in their community.

Their views of community:

- They aspire for strong family values and well-maintained infrastructure
- Few agree that some people experience barriers because of where they live and what they look like
- They are more likely to avoid talking about the role of race in shaping health outcomes and focus on the impact of income
- At the same time, few agree that everyone feels free from discrimination or has access to affordable, quality health care, safe and affordable housing, and quality jobs with good pay

*As determined by Hattaway based on community research

ILLUSTRATIVE PROJECT EXAMPLES

We're open to creative ideas that use our [Healthy Communities Message Manual](#) to reframe and shift harmful narratives to more accurate and inclusive narratives.

Some examples of what we might consider include:

- Community campaigns that change how people think and talk about racism, wealth, and health
- Creative projects — such as storytelling, visual arts, or written narratives — that vividly illustrate what communities need to thrive or highlight the good in communities and the people in them
- Partnerships between artists, organizers, and storytellers to reach people in new ways

These are not absolute examples nor would a concept meeting one of these examples be guaranteed funding. We encourage original approaches to how you plan to apply or incorporate our **Healthy Communities Message Manual** into your work.

OUTCOMES WE SEEK

Health Forward has identified specific outcomes related to our strategic purpose plan.

The outcomes that relate to this work and strategy for narrative change are:

Increased community knowledge of the connection between race equity, economic inclusion, and health equity by:

- Increased narrative change skills and knowledge to advance our purpose strategies with community partners
- Increased visibility of narrative frames around racial equity and economic justice across different forms of media
- Increased recognition of racial equity and economic justice among stakeholders

WHO SHOULD APPLY?

Nonprofits, arts and cultural organizations, and other community-based entities working to advance racial equity, economic inclusion, and health equity are encouraged to apply.

This includes:

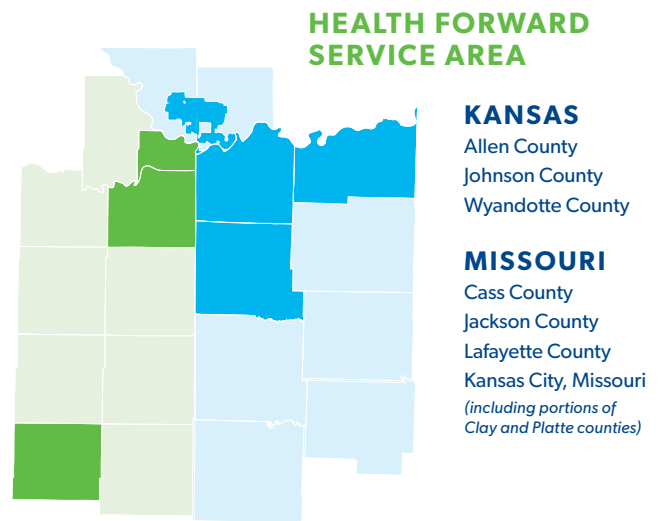
- Organizations that help people move from aspiration to action by creating low-barrier ways for people to get involved, build confidence, and help people see their efforts make a difference. Applicants should show how they will engage their communities around equity issues, using outreach, storytelling, or organizing aligned with the **Healthy Communities Message Manual**.
- Organizations who are actively building bridges and bringing people together across divides — whether geographic, racial, economic, or social — and create a deeper sense of belonging across the region. We're looking for groups that use communication to build connection and shared purpose and shared goals, with language that reflects the values in the **Healthy Communities Message Manual**.
- Organizations that foster healthy people and center equity in all aspects of our community health system. These organizations help people see that health isn't just a personal choice — it's something built, block by block, across our communities.
- Organizations working to close the gaps that make life less stable for people in historically excluded communities. Strong applicants will have established communications capacity at the organizational level — or a clear plan to build and sustain it — and will be prepared to use the **Healthy Communities Message Manual** to shift harmful narratives around health, race, and economic justice.

Because of Health Forward's existing support of local journalism, news media organizations will not be considered through this funding opportunity.

Applicants should demonstrate in their application their experience and intentions in engaging and elevating voices of community. Applicants should also detail how they will clearly connect our **Healthy Communities Message Manual** to center the voices and experiences of people most affected by inequitable policies and health inequities. Additionally, applications should describe your existing organizational capacity to implement narrative change work.

ELIGIBILITY CRITERIA

To be eligible for this opportunity, the applicant must work in the [Health Forward service area](#). Health Forward will not fund organizations, projects or advocacy focused on electing or opposing specific candidates for elected office. Other [eligibility criteria](#) is available on our website. We encourage you to review it.



APPLICATION PROCESS STARTING SEPT. 3

The first step in the process is to submit a basic application. This will include a brief overview of your organization's work and alignment with this funding opportunity. We are available to consult with applicants — and encourage a consult — prior to the basic application deadline. You can submit a [request for a consultation](#) on our website.

Our basic application will be available on our application portal from Sept. 3 through Sept. 25. To get there, please visit our website and navigate to [Money](#), then [Funding Opportunities](#). If your organization

has already registered for portal access, you can continue to use your established credentials to log in; however, once logged in you will be asked to update your password due to our new software system. If you are a new applicant or need access to the portal, you will need to register. New applicants may set up an account through our portal.

If you need assistance, contact our Impact Administration team at impactadmin@healthforward.org or 816-241-7006.

NEXT STEPS

Following the basic application deadline at noon on Thursday, Sept. 25, our Health Forward team will begin reviewing applications. During this period, we may seek supplemental information to clarify or expound on the information submitted or as part of our due diligence process.

Shortly after this period, we will undergo a final review phase and may follow up with any remaining questions to help deepen our understanding of your work.

We aim to award funding in November 2025.



HERE'S WHAT WE MEAN WHEN WE SAY...

Health Forward has developed a [glossary of terms](#) to create shared understanding internally and externally with partners that is available on our website. This includes terms commonly used by Health Forward and relevant to this funding opportunity.

ABOUT HEALTH FORWARD

Health Forward Foundation is supporting and building inclusive, powerful, and healthy communities by prioritizing people who experience the greatest injustices in health outcomes. Through leadership, advocacy, and resources, we are championing an equitable future that will serve us all. Since we began partnering with nonprofit organizations in 2005, Health Forward has awarded more than \$435 million to address community health needs.

We invite you to learn more about Health Forward Foundation by [visiting our website](#).

