

Establishing Healthcare Partnerships

Background

This resource helps coalitions build partnerships with healthcare organizations to support healthy eating and active living initiatives. It outlines reasons for partnering with healthcare organizations, recommends strategies for approaching them, and shares key points to consider before pursuing partnerships.



Why partner with healthcare organizations?

Partnerships with healthcare organizations can increase your coalition's reach and sustainability. Likewise, your coalition can help healthcare organizations meet patient outcome targets and satisfy regulatory requirements. Key factors driving these partnerships include:



Aligned missions. Healthcare organizations strive to improve community health and well-being and often serve the same communities as your coalition. They may be motivated to invest in efforts beyond clinical care that support patients' health.



Policy trends. Models such as the [Accountable Health Communities Model](#) and [Medicaid 1115 demonstration projects](#) encourage healthcare organizations to address patients' social needs, including food security and physical activity. However, health systems often rely on community partners to provide the programmatic capacity to do this.



Regulation. Nonprofit hospitals must fund community benefits to remain exempt from federal and state taxes. Community benefits may include charitable giving, community-focused activities, coalition participation, and subsidized services.

Example. The Children's Hospital Los Angeles reclaims and redistributes excess food through local coalitions, including the Hollywood Food Coalition. It also distributes produce boxes at community events. Other examples of hospital-coalition partnerships can be found in [hospital community benefit plans](#) available through the California Department of Health Care Access and Information.



Is partnership feasible for your coalition?

Although partnerships with healthcare organizations offer strong potential benefits, they may also present challenges. Direct investment in community-based initiatives, like coalition work, represents a small share of hospital spending on community benefits, and hospitals may prioritize health issues other than food security and physical activity. Before approaching a hospital, research its community health priorities and consider the following to determine whether a partnership would be a strategic fit.

- **What are your coalition's needs?** A partnership with a healthcare organization may not include upfront funding. Many California hospitals address food insecurity through programming, food

distribution events, and referral partnerships. Consider whether your coalition can begin partnering without financial support. Hospitals may also offer in-kind support or collaborate on grant proposals.

- **What can your coalition contribute?** Healthcare partners will expect demonstrated expertise and infrastructure. For example, hospitals may seek support with food distribution, nutrition education, or SNAP enrollment. Before approaching a potential partner, ensure your coalition can take on additional clients and manage communications, contracting, and data sharing. Feeding America’s [Toolkit for Food Bank-Health Care Partnerships](#) provides practical guidance on establishing healthcare partnerships.
- **Which hospitals share your priorities?** California hospitals annually submit a community benefit plan to the [California Department of Health Care Access and Information](#) summarizing their health priorities and community benefit contributions, including grants. According to a [2024 California Health Care Foundation](#) study, only 28 percent of California hospitals identified food security and nutrition as priorities in 2021. Because relatively few hospitals prioritize food security or nutrition, coalitions should review recent plans in their counties to find a hospital with strong alignment. You can access plans submitted after January 2025 by searching the [HCAI database](#) by hospital name or location. Plans submitted January 2025 and earlier can be accessed by downloading the [full data set](#).



Approaching healthcare organizations

When approaching healthcare organizations as partners, your coalition should be prepared with a strong business case that demonstrates how partnering with your coalition will advance the healthcare organization’s priorities. To approach a healthcare organization, take the following steps:

- **Identify contacts.** Start by finding the right person within the healthcare organization, typically within an office of community engagement or a community benefit office (though the name will vary across organizations). Community benefit plans typically link to a hospital’s web page with contact information. County health departments that oversee community health assessment and improvement plans may also help identify key leaders from local hospitals.
- **Highlight alignment in goals.** A hospital may focus on healthy eating for reasons other than the ones your coalition prioritizes. For example, hospitals might be concerned with improving quality ratings, avoiding financial penalties, or addressing homelessness. Connect your coalition’s capabilities and expertise to the hospital’s priorities. Find additional tips in the *Building a Business Case* resource.
- **Identify sustainable funding.** Community benefit programs may support pilot projects that demonstrate impact and make the case for future funding. Explore additional funding sources, such as foundations and health insurance providers. Medi-Cal, California’s Medicaid insurance provider, covers nutrition supports for eligible beneficiaries with qualifying clinical needs. Private insurers have also funded FoodRx programs, in which patients with a diet-related illness or food insecurity receive “prescriptions” for healthy foods.

Even if a hospital hasn’t funded an activity related to a coalition’s work, it may still be worthwhile to meet with hospital representatives to introduce them to what your coalition and its members do. The meeting would be an opportunity to let them know how a partnership could create mutual benefits for your coalition and the hospital. Your coalition may also ask to participate in the development of a hospital’s next community health needs assessment or improvement plan.

Sources

The content in this document was informed by the following resources:

- Center for Health Law and Policy Innovation, Harvard Law School. "[Health-Related Social Needs in Medicare and Medicaid and an Uncertain Crossroads.](#)" 2025.
- Urban Institute. "[Building Health System Partnerships to Combat Food Insecurity.](#)" 2021
- Center for Health Care Strategies. "[Tools for Supporting Social Service and Health Care Partnerships to Address Social Determinants of Health.](#)" 2018.