

A Blueprint for Workplace Health Equity Circles

Public health organizations work towards more equitable, ethical, and socially just ecosystems. Creating healthier communities entails facilitating psychological safety in the workplace and honestly assessing how employers perpetuate harm internally or fail to address systemic issues. Without proper self-evaluation, it is much more difficult to truly understand and serve ASTHO members—the chief health officials of 59 states, territories, freely associated states, and Washington, D.C. In other words, public health organizations must walk the talk.

As a core element of its Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Accessibility (DEIA) efforts, ASTHO convenes Health Equity Circles (HECs), inviting staff from all organizational levels for 45-minute bi-monthly discussions to facilitate the inner-work necessary to engage with external stakeholders. With the goal of improving both internal dynamics and external partnerships, ASTHO’s HECs are staff-led, informal, and virtual discussions that center around a topic or article shared ahead of time. HECs support ASTHO’s values of applying fair and equitable practices while fostering an environment where staff belong, feel safe to engage, and free to express ideas and perspectives.

HECs also demonstrate ASTHO’s intentional effort to uplift equity in a “One ASTHO” spirit. They have been critical in creating an internal culture that promotes a just and ethical place to work, as well as promoting internal Truth, Racial Healing, and Transformation (TRHT) work that aligns with ASTHO’s commitment to the health and racial equity goals outlined in the 2022-2024 [strategic plan](#). To achieve these goals, ASTHO must continuously reflect discussions of racial and health equity, encouraging power sharing across the organizations; HECs provide the space to do so by amplifying the voices of teams and workgroups across the organization to facilitate discussions on topics relevant to their expertise.

How to Conduct a Workplace Health Equity Circle

Identify Primary Learning Considerations for Audience

1. Learn about the Health Equity, Diversity Initiatives (HEDI) Team’s internal and external work to advance health equity.
2. Provide a safe space for crucial conversations related to health and racial equity.
3. Exchange ideas to personally and/or professionally move from **discussion** to **action**.

Select Reading Materials and Discussion Topic

1. Select a journal article or grey literature that discusses a topic that would be helpful in pushing towards the operationalization of health equity. If the article is longer than a couple of pages, it’s helpful to provide a summary of key points.
 - a. Topic examples include the curb-cut effect, psychological safety, LGBTQIA+ rights and history, strength-based approaches to public health, and health equity in all policies.

Build a Timeline

1. Begin researching topics based on organizational culture and external partners needs three to four weeks prior to the meeting.
2. Send out an email with the article and discussion questions one to two weeks prior to the meeting.
 - a. Utilize organizational listserv if available to advertise the HEC.

3. Define internal learning objectives prior to the HEC.
4. Create a PowerPoint presentation to show at the HEC that includes the following:
 - a. Level-setting for the meeting that includes guidelines for engagement.
 - b. A summary of the reading materials.
 - c. The questions to be discussed.
 - d. Talking points that highlight clear connections between the organization and discussion topic.
5. Send out a summary reminder email the week of the HEC.

Prepare Facilitators

1. Encourage authentic communication between participants of varying leadership roles within the organization with an emphasis on removing one's title from the conversation.
2. Incorporate readings to frame discussions around health equity related topics.
3. Meet staff where they are but aim to challenge them and create a learning environment.
4. Be conscientious of the general landscape of your organization.

Share Guidelines with Participants

1. Create a safe space.
 - a. Encourage freedom to share, to be honest, and to be vulnerable.
 - b. What is shared is confidential, honored, and respected.
2. Use "I" statements.
 - a. Focus on your own experiences. Avoid speaking for others or an entire group.
3. Step up, step back.
 - a. If you tend to be quieter in groups, challenge yourself to share. If you tend to share, make sure there is space for others.
4. Open hearts, open minds.
 - a. The HEC is a no-judgement zone.
 - b. Be open to perspectives and experiences of others.
 - c. Listen with curiosity and a willingness to learn and change.
 - d. Resist the desire to interrupt.
 - e. Be open to the wisdom in each person's story.

Results and Participant Quotes

HEC participants reported feeling that their voices have a platform to be expressed. HECs can facilitate organizational improvement by providing a forum for open communication and discussions on equity issues. By allowing employees to voice their concerns and share ideas, organizations can identify areas for improvement and create a culture of equity. HECs also serve as a model for other public health organizations, providing a framework for facilitating difficult discussions.

"One of my favorite parts of the Health Equity Circle is that we give each other grace to reflect from a personal and professional standpoint. For folks that aren't directly involved in health equity projects, it's an opportunity to see how equity can and should be incorporated into our work and in our daily lives."

"This group reminds me that ASTHO is committed to operating through a health equity lens. It empowers to explore topics and issues that, while uncomfortable, are critical for us to move forward."

"The HEC creates momentum. It's what I discover that propels me to action!"

Read about how [Health Equity Circles promote racial healing and understanding in the workplace](#) or contact ASTHO's [Health Equity team](#) for more information.

Appendix: Health Equity Circle Standard Operating Procedure and Example

PRE-PLANNING		
Identify Article	Dates	Notes
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Select article 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> At least three-four weeks prior to meeting 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> PDF Attachment Link (If available)
VIRTUAL MEETING SPACE		
Written Description	Dates	Notes
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Schedule meeting 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> As soon as the article is chosen 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Security Options: Only check "Password" [insert password]
CALENDAR INVITATION		
Written Description	Dates	Notes
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Send calendar invitation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> At least two to four weeks prior to Health Equity Circle 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Attach PDF List link (If available)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Identify two questions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Completed prior to sending invitation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> These two questions will be added to the calendar invitation. Another staff member should identify additional questions should be identified as back-up.
CALENDAR INVITATION CHECKLIST		

- Invite from [Facilitating Team] to all-staff
- Uncheck "request responses"
- Description subject to change
- Objectives subject to change
- Attach the article
- Include Zoom link

SAMPLE CALENDAR INVITATION
<p>Target Audience: Organization Staff</p> <p>Example Description: The [Facilitating Team] introduces the Health Equity Circle. [Organization] staff will convene for an engaging virtual conversation facilitated by [Staffer/s] on the journal article.</p> <p>Learning Objectives: Participants will be able to...</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Learn about [organization's] internal and external work to advance health equity. • Provide a safe space for crucial conversations related to health and racial equity. • Exchange ideas to personally and/or professionally move from discussion to action. <p>Questions to Consider</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. How can law be used as a communication tool to develop and disseminate the stories of the unheard and unseen people and communities to build support among policy makers and the public for advancing equity as a public health?

2. What roles do public health practitioners play in addressing hidden structural and systemic inequities that are difficult to trace because they are embedded in laws and accompanying policies and practices?

PROMOTION SAMPLES

Organizational Calendar	Dates	Notes
Send an email to [insert name] to post on calendar.	At least two weeks in advance, but ideally submit once for the year.	Make the description general (i.e., do not include the article and facilitator. These details will be included in the Outlook invitation).

Target Audience: [organization] Staff (Optional Meeting)
Description: [facilitating team] introduces the Health Equity Circle. [organization] staff will convene for an engaging virtual conversation facilitated by the [facilitating team].

Dates	Notes
At least two weeks but ideally four weeks in advance.	Make the description general (Do not include the article and facilitator. These details will be included in the Outlook invitation).

WEEK OF SESSION

- Two days before HEC, attach PDF summary slide to calendar invitation and resend (as a reminder).
- Uncheck "Request Responses"
- Morning of HEC, send an email from [facilitating team's email] to full staff listserv as Bcc.

Sample Email

Subject: Friendly Reminder & Prep | Today's Health Equity Circle at 1 p.m. ET

Attached is a summary of the article in preparation for today's Health Equity Circle. We look forward to a lively discussion!

Questions to Consider:

1. [Example Question 1]: How can law be used as a communication tool to develop and disseminate the stories of the unheard and unseen people and communities to build support among policy makers and the public for advancing equity as a public health?
2. [Example Question 2]: What roles do public health practitioners play in addressing hidden structural and systemic inequities that are difficult to trace because they are embedded in laws and accompanying policies and practices?

The [facilitating team]

[insert zoom or teams link]

POWERPOINT

Add a summary slide with key bullet points.

Calendar Message: Attached is a summary of the article in preparation for Thursday's Health Equity Circle. We look forward to a lively discussion!

How to Insert Music

In PowerPoint, go to the slide where you want to insert the content. **On the toolbar ribbon, select the Insert tab, select Video, and then select Online Video.** The Insert Video dialog box opens. Paste the embed code in the box named From a Video Embed Code, and then press Enter.

VIRTUAL MEETING

Virtual Meeting Platform

[insert virtual meeting link]

Virtual Meeting Event Day Reminders:

- Sign-in to virtual meeting platform and launch meeting early to change the settings to eliminate “Waiting Room”
- Suggest facilitator log-in at least 30 minutes in advance
- Suggest **[facilitating team]** staff log-in at least 15-10 minutes in advance
- Change name to: [facilitating team]
- Add all **[facilitating team]** staff as co-host: [insert facilitators]
- Mute participants
- All **[facilitating team]** feel free to join in the crucial conversation (verbally/chat)
- All **[facilitating team]** monitor chat and note parking lot topics