

## FOREWORD by Karyl T. Rattay, MD, MS

When I started as Director of the Delaware Division of Public Health (DPH) in 2009, I identified several priorities for the Division. Among those priorities was, and still is, achieving health equity in Delaware. Over the course of the past several years, my staff has worked with many community leaders, non-profit organizations, other state agencies and stakeholders to develop a strategy to reach our vision of *health equity for all Delawareans where everyone will achieve their full health potential*. I am pleased to present this guide as a resource to support that strategy, which can be summarized as moving upstream to improve the conditions that create health and inequities in health.

Our mission at the Division of Public Health is to protect and promote the health of all people in Delaware. I believe we are making progress and we can see our population health statistics improving in many areas. Yet even as our overall health improves, we have persistent health inequities in our state. In some cases, the gaps we see in health between different population groups or communities are getting worse, not better. Persistent and growing inequities may be partially blamed on the current economic environment, and are certainly not unique to Delaware. However, it is time for a more concerted upstream effort to address those inequities. On the following pages you will read about the evidence that supports this perspective, particularly the need to focus more of our attention and resources on underlying social conditions in our communities. Research has made it increasingly clear that efforts to address the social and environmental determinants of health— the conditions in which we live, work, and play—are critical to improving health and achieving health equity.

But while there is a practical imperative for change that is difficult to ignore, there is also a moral imperative. It is simply not acceptable that Black infants in Delaware die at a rate that is more than twice that of White infants. It is unacceptable that we can predict how long someone will live based upon their ZIP code or income level. These are not naturally occurring or random phenomena related to individual weaknesses. Rather, they are systemic, structural, and predictable. At the same time they are not insurmountable. In fact, many efforts to improve social conditions are making a difference in the health of communities across the country. Many important initiatives are already making a difference in our state, and I am grateful for the efforts of my staff and our community partners for the work they are doing.

I acknowledge that the concepts outlined in this guide represent a new way of doing business for DPH (and many of our partners). Change is not always easy. However, I ask

that we keep an open mind and consider that we will not be able to make substantial changes to difficult problems unless we are willing to make fundamental shifts. I also ask that we realize that these changes are not those of a single person or group or section to make, but for our entire Division, partners in other state agencies, community-based organizations, and residents. We know we cannot achieve health equity alone and we know it will not happen overnight.

As you will read, many of the factors that influence health are grounded in historical inequities, often beyond the reach of traditional public health efforts and beyond the reach of state government. Health inequities result from a complex web of factors that span multiple sectors and disciplines. We all have a role to play, and this guide is meant to be a resource to promote and support a sustained, coordinated approach for moving upstream. It was originally developed for public health practitioners and community partners, but I believe it may be used by many different groups working in various ways to fulfill our common vision. Many individuals working outside of the health sector may not even realize the impact their work has on health and health equity. I hope this guide helps them to better understand their role in promoting health and health equity. By raising awareness of the social determinants of health and sharing strategies and lessons learned for promoting healthier living and working conditions, we can mobilize our collective capacity to foster optimal health for all Delawareans.

I look forward to working with you.

Karyl T. Rattay, MD, MS

