



The Case

The worldwide pandemic and recent Vermont floods have shown us that not all Vermonters have the same opportunities to be healthy, and also demonstrated the importance of a robust public health system. All Vermonters deserve to have access to affordable housing, nutritious food, and medical and mental health care. There are many barriers to living healthy in Vermont, including financial, educational, geographic and other systemic barriers. The vision of the Vermont Public Health Institute is to see a healthy and equitable Vermont across all people and communities.

About Vermont Public Health Institute

VtPHI is the only Vermont-wide organization founded to support non-centralized work to address health inequities. In its essence, the VtPHI recognizes and celebrates that each locality possesses assets with which it can address its unique challenges. As a trusted organization, we have the agility to engage and empower communities. We meet people where they are, knowing that each community has its own level of readiness. We value and center people's living or lived experiences and see our work as collaborative instead of authoritative.

The Institute's mission is to promote innovative approaches to health equity through community-based and evidence-informed strategies to improve the health of all Vermonters. We have been fulfilling our mission, in part, by supporting community-led coalitions. These coalitions include people from marginalized groups, such as individuals living with disabilities, people with low incomes, those who identify as LGBTQIA+, and Black, indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC). We encourage coalitions to use quantitative and qualitative data to determine which challenges to address first. From those assessments, local coalitions create their own unique processes and implement community projects that address health inequities.

**"The Institute's work "has been one visible and tangible project to begin to incubate grassroots solutions to inequity that honors the ideas of those most burdened by unjust barriers to better health."
- VDH District Director**

Previous Work

Thanks to the resources provided through a contract with the Vermont Department of Health (VDH), VtPHI created the Vermont Community Health Equity Partnership (VT CHEP), a statewide initiative with a regional approach that operates under the belief that true change begins at the local level. VT CHEP had two requirements - that the local work addressed health inequities created or exacerbated by COVID-19 and that people with living or lived experience participated in all work components.

With leadership and technical assistance from VtPHI, in less than 12 months, the VT CHEP successfully established new or supported existing health equity coalitions across the state. We provided more than 100 peer-designed In-person gatherings, peer-led capacity-building workshops with community experts, and grant process and discussion workshops; these efforts reached over 2,100 Vermonters.

What Can Happen When the Community Decides

Rutland Vermont's Euphoric Hair Experience

The Rutland District Team created a vision statement and goal:

The voice and lived experiences of BIPOC, LGBTQ folks, people living with disabilities, and other underserved and oppressed community members are centered and valued. We curate a safe space for people to speak from that lived experience inform projects, programs, and policies in Rutland County.

This centering is critical to making community networks more just, equitable, and inclusive for all. The Rutland District Team funded eight community projects, including Euphoric Hair Experience. With VTCHEP grant money, they opened a permanent braiding salon for BIPOC youth and adults in the Rutland community. They sponsored and organized BIPOC youth and adult hair clinics to make services available that were otherwise unavailable in the community. This service assists with youth and adult mental health, with participants reporting positive thoughts, due to increased confidence in physical appearance.

Another component of VT CHEP included hiring local "integrators" in each of the 11 local districts. Integrators acted as facilitators and coaches to the local coalitions and participated in a learning community with other integrators across the state. We contracted with organizational coaches and health equity experts, such as Health Resources in Action, to build the capacity of integrators, which in turn, strengthened the work of the coalitions. Additionally, we provided \$134,100 in stipends for community member engagement.

Finally, VT CHEP served as a vehicle to support local work by funding community projects to address health inequities among those most negatively impacted by COVID-19. Following established funding criteria, VtPHI distributed community grants totaling close to \$2M that addressed more than 20 areas of focus and 18 focus populations.

"There are people (white people) who have the option to continue health equity work, but for the folks impacted by the inequities, disparities, and outcomes of the work, it's not a choice to continue." - Community Partner

Future Work

VT CHEP's vital and successful work concluded on November 30, 2023, and VtPHI desires that this work continues. VtPHI has a well-crafted Strategic Plan to guide its work with these four priorities:

- Priority 1** - Establish a sustainable, inclusive, collaborative, and innovative structure to facilitate a transformation in health equity.
- Priority 2** - Foster a consistent, diverse, and regenerative flow of funds and other resources to support Institute actions directed to equitable public health outcomes.
- Priority 3** - Be a significant contributor for Vermont to engage communities and build capacity toward health equity.
- Priority 4** - Improve the health and well-being of Vermonters through an integrated, inclusive, and robust public health workforce.

"In the rural landscape, even folks working on the same issues or dealing with the same obstacles may not know about each other or how to connect... We can create bridges, and work together to alleviate social isolation, improve access to health and wellness, and create more inclusive and thriving communities."
- Community-Based Organization

To maintain the momentum of the VT CHEP and provide the infrastructure necessary for success, VtPHI is seeking support to hire the necessary leadership to oversee local equity coalitions and work with integrators across Vermont. A VtPHI Executive Director will provide thought leadership to the integrators and facilitate an action learning collaborative that brings local voices together for in-person and virtual training, workshops, and convenings. Such leadership will ensure that VtPHI provides a cohesive and tangible approach to implementing all we have learned from the VT CHEP initiative while advocating for continued health equity across Vermont.

An integral part of facilitating a transformational initiative is having a public health workforce ready to make health equity a reality. VtPHI has been supporting a community health worker association that supports current community health workers and identifies future workforce members. Funding for a VtPHI leader will sustain and strengthen this critical workforce development effort.

Without funding, the important work we accomplished with VT CHEP will stall, and the implementation of our strategic plan will be hampered. We welcome funding partners to help us fulfill our mission of promoting innovative approaches to health equity through community-based and evidence-informed strategies to improve the health of all Vermonters.

"Health equity exists when all people have a fair and just opportunity to be healthy – especially those who have experienced socioeconomic disadvantage, historical injustice, and other avoidable systemic inequalities that are often associated with social categories of race, gender, ethnicity, social position, sexual orientation, and disability."

- Vermont Department of Health