



COMMENTARY PUBLIC HEALTH AND EQUITY

## Addressing Health Disparities in Maryland Communities: Insights from a Public Health State Affiliate and Strategic Advocacy Recommendations

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### ABSTRACT

The Maryland Public Health Association (MdPHA) and its Advocacy Committee tackle health disparities through legislative initiatives. By partnering with state affiliates, MdPHA influences critical areas such as environmental health, health equity, behavioral health, violence prevention, and food security. Their advocacy has led to significant legislative achievements that enhance health promotion and equity. This paper highlights MdPHA's complex work in advocating for evidence-based policies in 2024 to reduce health inequities and lists recommendations for other state affiliates.

**Keywords:** Affiliation, Community Participation, Educational Level, Health Policy, Intersectoral Collaboration, Public Advocacy, Partnership Practice, Public Health

### INTRODUCTION

State affiliates are vital in aligning health policies with community needs, and the Maryland Public Health Association (MdPHA) is instrumental in shaping health legislation in Maryland.

The MdPHA is a non-profit, statewide organization comprised of public health professionals committed to enhancing the well-being of all Maryland residents through education, advocacy, and collaboration. The organization advocates for public policies that align with its vision of fostering healthy, equitable communities across the state. As the state affiliate of the American Public Health Association (APHA), MdPHA has nearly 145 years of history dedicated to advancing population health and addressing the health disparities affecting both the state and the nation.<sup>[1]</sup>

The purpose of this commentary is to share how MdPHA's Advocacy Committee, led by experts from prominent academic institutions, utilized evidence-based research and community-focused strategies to engage with academic partners, community organizations, and the Maryland legislature to sponsor nearly 30 public health bills during the 2024 legislative session, many of which became law.

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The significance of MdPHA and other state public health affiliates in advancing health legislation cannot be overstated. MdPHA's dedication to advocacy, community engagement, and addressing health disparities plays a crucial role in shaping policies that promote the well-being of all Maryland residents. Their efforts have resulted in the passage of legislation tackling key environmental health issues, diminishing healthcare disparities within immigrant communities through access to the state's health insurance marketplace, funding Maryland's 988 crisis helpline to support those facing mental health or substance use emergencies, and establishing of the state's Commission on Public Health, among other vital initiatives. As health challenges continue to develop, these affiliates will remain essential in ensuring that the state's legislative efforts embody the principles of equity, access, and quality healthcare.

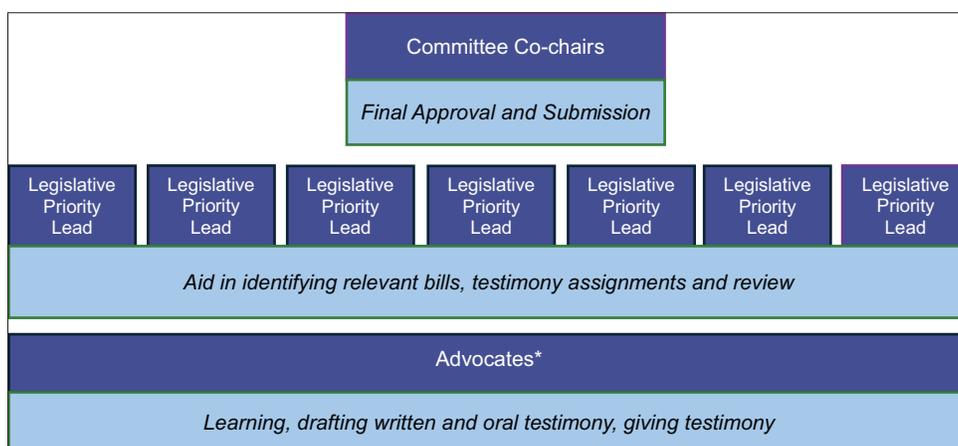
## OVERVIEW

MdPHA's advocacy committee operates in Maryland to address racial and social determinants of health and reduce health inequities. It focuses on the Maryland General Assembly, which represents the electorate by passing laws, raising revenue, and overseeing state agencies.<sup>[2]</sup> MdPHA's Advocacy Committee meets biweekly from January to April and holds a wrap-up event for members and legislators to discuss outcomes. See Figure 1 for the MdPHA's Advocacy Committee Structure. The co-chairs of the Advocacy Committee participate in the monthly Public Health Authority Affiliates Convening meeting led by the APHA. This meeting allows for sharing successes and discussing legislative concerns while fostering a cross-state public health advocacy network.

MdPHA aligns its legislative agenda with the annual advocacy priorities of the APHA, such as the "APHA 2024 Advocacy Priorities for the 118<sup>th</sup> Congress and the Biden

Administration."<sup>[3]</sup> These priorities are voted on by MdPHA's broader membership during the annual fall meeting. Comprising public health professionals and students, MdPHA's Advocacy Committee monitors, analyzes, and advocates for health-related legislation through expert written and oral testimony, policymaking education, and public mobilization. To streamline efforts, the committee uses a shared drive that includes an annual legislative bill tracker to monitor bill statuses and organize advocacy activities, ensuring members remain engaged throughout the session.

In 2024, MdPHA enhanced its advocacy by collaborating with key partners to advance public health and equity. These partnerships addressed issues such as healthcare access, environmental health, mental health, and health equity throughout the state. MdPHA partnered with Maryland Health Care for All<sup>[4]</sup> to push for expanded healthcare coverage, ensuring essential services for all Marylanders. Collaborations with the Maryland League of Conservation Voters<sup>[5]</sup> and the Smart on Pesticides Coalition<sup>[6]</sup> aimed to protect public health from environmental hazards. In addition, MdPHA worked with Healthy School Food Maryland<sup>[7]</sup> to improve nutrition in schools. Recognizing the link between immigration and health equity, MdPHA teamed up with Central American Solidarity Association (CASA)<sup>[8]</sup> to enhance healthcare access for immigrant communities. Mental health advocacy, in collaboration with the National Alliance on Mental Illness,<sup>[9]</sup> focused on expanding resources and reducing stigma. MdPHA also strengthened academic partnerships with Coppin State University, Morgan State University, Georgetown University, and the University of Maryland Baltimore County to foster research and student-faculty engagement. These collaborations highlight MdPHA's commitment to collective action in addressing public health challenges and promoting well-being for all Marylanders.



**Figure 1:** MdPHA's advocacy committee structure. \*Can aid in identifying relevant bills. MdPHA: Maryland public health association.

The affiliate's commitment to strengthening public health practice is exemplified by various innovative programs and activities. For instance, the Back to School Children's Health Webinar Event delved into crucial topics such as climate change's impact on pediatric health and the importance of vaccination. Similarly, engagement in educational webinars like "Climate Change and Our Health" fostered valuable discussions on climate change's health implications, complemented by the release of educational resources to empower the community with actionable insights.

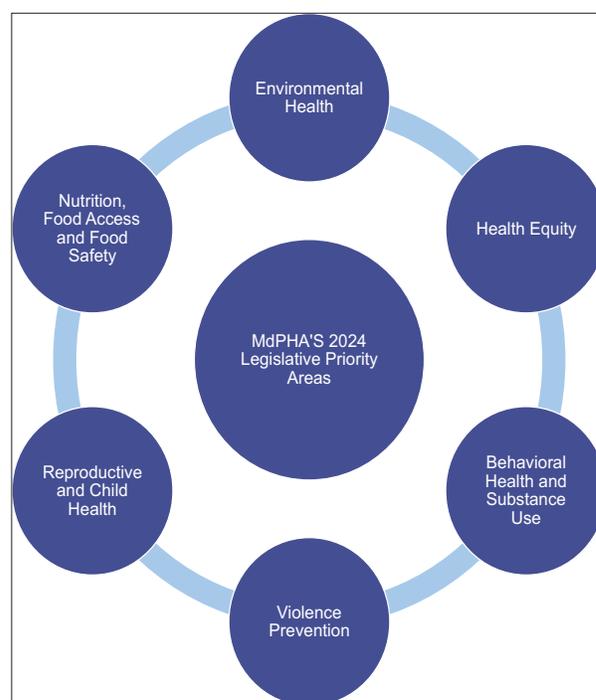
Moreover, MdPHA's dedication to building a public health movement is evident through advocacy training sessions and community outreach efforts. The affiliate empowers individuals to influence public health policy through sessions like "Transforming Public Will Into Political Power" and ensures effective dissemination of public health knowledge and fostering community-driven initiatives. During National Public Health Week in April 2024, MdPHA hosted multiple events, including the innovative "GardenRx: Cultivating Health Through Gardening," which showcased its commitment to fostering community health initiatives and environmental sustainability. In addition, a webinar on "Perspectives in Climate Change" engaged participants on critical intersections between environmental sustainability and human well-being, emphasizing MdPHA's commitment to advancing public health discourse.

The bills sponsored by MdPHA in 2024 were organized into six priority areas including health equity; environmental health; behavioral health and substance use; violence prevention; reproductive and child health; and nutrition, food access and food safety, as described below and outlined in Figure 2. A comprehensive list of all legislative bills backed by MdPHA's testimony in 2024 is shown in Table 1.

### Health Equity

Health equity is vital in public health advocacy, ensuring all individuals have fair access to healthcare resources and opportunities for optimal health outcomes. MdPHA provided expert testimony on five health equity bills this legislative session; two of the bills signed into law are summarized below.

One notable success is the Access to Care Act, which aims to diminish healthcare disparities within immigrant communities. In partnership with various organizations and stakeholders across Maryland, MdPHA championed this bill, which will allow all Maryland residents to purchase private health insurance through the state health insurance marketplace, regardless of their immigration status. This law represents a significant advancement for immigrants, granting them access to necessary navigational support and simplified Value Plans that make health coverage more comprehensible and accessible.



**Figure 2:** MdPHA's 2024 legislative priority areas. MdPHA: Maryland public health association.

Another important piece of legislation supported by MdPHA is the Non-occupational Post-exposure Prophylaxis (nPEP) Standing Order Program. This initiative enables pharmacists to dispense nPEP under specific conditions, responding to the needs of vulnerable populations such as sexual assault survivors and pediatric patients. The Maryland Department of Health will create regulations for this program. nPEP is crucial for averting HIV transmission in individuals exposed through sexual contact or injection drug use outside of occupational settings.<sup>[10,11]</sup>

### Environmental Health

Environmental health is a key focus of public health advocacy in Maryland, aimed at ensuring healthy living conditions for all residents. Recent legislation targets health risks while promoting sustainability through improved air and water quality, reduced chemical exposure, and climate initiatives. During the 2024 Maryland Legislative Session, MdPHA supported nine environmental bills, with two successes which are described below.

Tobacco-related diseases claim approximately 7500 lives annually in Maryland alone.<sup>[12]</sup> Nationally, secondhand smoke causes 7300 lung cancer deaths and 33,950 heart disease deaths each year.<sup>[13]</sup> While Maryland's air quality has improved, approximately 131 million Americans still live in areas with unhealthy pollution levels. Despite improvements, many Maryland jurisdictions received low grades for air

**Table 1:** List of all legislative bills supported by MdPHA’s testimony in 2024

Bill Name	House and Senate Bill Number	Bill Category	Status
Public Health - Nonoccupational Postexposure Prophylaxis (nPEP) Standing Order Program - Establishment	HB0127/SB0246	Healthy Equity	Passed
Health Insurance - Qualified Resident Enrollment Program (Access to Care Act)	HB0728/SB0705	Health Equity	Passed
Legally Protected Health Care - Gender-Affirming Treatment	HB0691/SB0119	Health Equity	Passed
Maryland Health Benefit Exchange – State–Based Young Adult Health Insurance Subsidies Pilot Program – Amount of Annual Subsidies	HB0953/SB0701	Health Equity	Passed
Prescription Drug Affordability Board - Authority for Upper Payment Limits and Funding (Lowering Prescription Drug Costs for All Marylanders Act of 2024)	HB0340/SB0338	Healthy Equity	Did Not Pass
Primary and Secondary Education - Breakfast and Lunch Programs - Universal Expansion Report	HB0696/SB0579	Nutrition, Food Access, and Safety	Passed
Food Supplement Benefits – Students – Eligibility (SNAP for Students)	HB0407	Nutrition, Food Access, and Safety	Did Not Pass
Public Health - Clean Indoor Air Act - Revisions	HB0238/SB0244	Environmental Health	Passed
Energy Efficiency and Conservation Plans	HB0864	Environmental Health	Passed
Renewable Energy Portfolio Standard - Eligible Sources - Alterations (Reclaim Renewable Energy Act of 2024)	HB0166/SB0146	Environmental Health	Did Not Pass
Environment - Impact of Environmental Permits and State Agency Actions	HB0024/SB0096	Environmental Health	Did Not Pass
Major Highway Capacity Expansion Projects - Impact Assessments and Mitigation Plans (Transportation and Climate Alignment Act of 2024)	HB0836/SB0681	Environmental Health	Did Not Pass
Maryland Building Performance Standards – Fossil Fuel Use, Energy Conservation, and Electric– and Solar–Ready Standards (Better Buildings Act of 2024)	HB1279/SB1023	Environmental Health	Did Not Pass
Responding to Emergency Needs from Extreme Weather (RENEW) Act of 2024	HB1438/SB0958	Environmental Health	Did Not Pass
Pesticides - PFAS Chemicals – Prohibition	HB1190	Environmental Health	Did Not Pass
Commemorative Weeks - Maryland Climate Education Week	HB0993	Environmental Health	Did Not Pass
Behavioral Health Crisis Response Services - 9-8-8 Trust Fund Fees	HB0933/SB0974	Behavioral Health/ Substance Abuse	Passed
Task Force on Responsible Use of Natural Psychedelic Substances	HB0548/SB1009	Behavioral Health/ Substance Abuse	Passed
Products, and Electronic Smoking Devices - Revisions (Tobacco Retail Modernization Act of 2024)	HB1180/SB1056	Behavioral Health/ Substance Abuse	Passed
Public Health - Opioids and Opioid Overdose Reversal Drugs - Information	HB1121	Behavioral Health/ Substance Abuse	Did Not Pass
Use of Nuclear Weapons	HJ0003/SJ0002	Violence Prevention	Did Not Pass

MdPHA: Maryland public health association.

quality.<sup>[14]</sup> To tackle these issues, House Bill 0238 and Senate Bill 0244 were introduced to prohibit vaping in certain indoor locations and require signage for smoking and vaping bans.

Fossil fuel combustion is often overlooked as a public health issue; however, its environmental consequences have significant health repercussions, contributing to

respiratory issues, cardiovascular diseases, and premature mortality. In 2018, fossil fuel pollution was associated with approximately 350,000 premature deaths in the United States (U.S.).<sup>[15]</sup> To combat these challenges, House Bill 0864, sponsored by Delegates Crosby and Qi, aims to enhance energy efficiency and conservation measures. This legislation compels electric and gas companies, along with

the Department of Housing and Community Development, to devise plans addressing efficiency standards and greenhouse gas reduction targets.

### ***Behavioral Health/Substance Use***

Legislative efforts to address behavioral health and substance use are vital for improving public health outcomes, as they enhance access to early intervention, promote safety, and support prevention initiatives. MdPHA backed four relevant bills, with two highlighted below.

MdPHA, in collaboration with the Fund MD 988 campaign, secured legislation to permanently fund Maryland's 988 crisis helpline through a 25-cent monthly fee on cell phones. This helpline supports those facing mental health or substance use emergencies, ensuring ongoing resources beyond federal grants and state funding, and may serve as a model for other states.

Finally, to combat the youth vaping epidemic affecting over 1.5 million middle and high school students,<sup>[16]</sup> MdPHA supported the Tobacco Retail Modernization Act of 2024. This bill requires retailers to keep e-cigarettes behind the counter and verify buyers' ages with ID. It also mandates enforcement checks by the Department of Health and restricts e-cig sales to specialized vape shops, excluding pharmacies. By tightening age restrictions and regulating sales, the bill aims to further reduce youth access to harmful e-cig products.

### ***Violence Prevention***

MdPHA supported HJ0003/SJ0002, a resolution aligned with other state legislatures and municipalities to reduce nuclear weapon risks. This "Back from the Brink" resolution urged Congress and the President to endorse the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons, highlighting the importance of nuclear disarmament for community health. Although it did not pass, MdPHA remains committed to violence prevention as a public health priority.

### ***Reproductive and Child Health***

In 2024, MdPHA's Advocacy Committee focused on implementing the Healthy Babies Equity Act, which MdPHA helped pass in 2022. As of July 2024, more than 12,400 pregnant Marylanders have enrolled in Medicaid regardless of immigration status (R. Moran, personal communication, July 17, 2024). MdPHA will continue advocating for laws supporting access to reproductive health services such as contraception, maternal care, and abortion rights, working closely with legislators to ensure they are informed by the latest research.

### ***Nutrition, Food Access, and Food Safety***

Food insecurity significantly affects children in the US,<sup>[17]</sup> disrupting their eating patterns and leading to adverse health and academic outcomes. In Maryland, 543,650 face hunger, including 167,020 children, with one in eight children affected.<sup>[18]</sup> Universal free school meals can enhance child health and academic performance, especially for low-income households.<sup>[19,20]</sup> MdPHA's Advocacy Committee supported Senate Bill 579: Primary and Secondary Education – Breakfast and Lunch Programs – Universal Expansion, mandating the State Department of Education to report on the cost of providing complimentary meals to all public school students by December 1, 2024. The bill was signed into law by Governor Wes Moore in April 2024.

## **INTERPRETATION**

### ***Themes and Patterns***

The discussed bills have yet to show measurable impacts, but their potential effects can be analyzed. The Access to Care Act may increase insured immigrants, enhance preventive care access, and improve health outcomes, though it could lead to longer wait times if the healthcare system becomes overwhelmed. Similarly, the Young Adult Health Insurance Subsidy Pilot Program might boost enrollment and reduce disparities, but it could face sustainability challenges and possible premium increases for other age groups. Ongoing evaluation of the impacts and potential downsides is essential as data emerges.

### ***Author's Intentions***

The MdPHA aims to influence public health policy in Maryland by empowering professionals to shape legislation that addresses community needs. It focuses on selecting bills related to urgent issues such as access to care, tobacco regulation, behavioral health crisis services, reduction of preventable diseases, maternal and reproductive health, and other pressing public health areas. The committee seeks to implement policies that promote healthier environments, reduce health disparities, and improve access to essential health services statewide.

### ***Lessons Learned***

1. *Collaboration is Key:* Effective partnerships with local organizations amplify advocacy efforts and create a more significant impact on public health practice.
2. *Comprehensive Training:* Investing in training programs for community members and advocates enhances their knowledge and advocacy skills, improving public health practice.
3. *Funding is Crucial:* Essential for sustaining and expanding public health initiatives and ensuring ongoing support for public health practice.

4. *Community Involvement*: Diverse and accessible events in virtual and in-person formats, increase awareness and participation in public health efforts, enhancing public health practice.
5. *Effective Communication*: Sharing clear and consistent messaging including regular updates on the situation and decision-making processes with diverse members of MdPHA and the public through various communication channels (including social media) can enhance trust, inclusivity, and transparency.
5. *Engage the Community*: Organize diverse and inclusive events to engage the community and promote active participation in public health efforts, improving public health practice. Ensure that multiple formats are available to accommodate varying audiences (virtual, in-person, and hybrid events).
6. *Be Proactive with Communication*: Working in isolation limits reach and effectiveness. Tailor messages to fit cultural contexts. Use plain language to ensure accessibility. Finally, engage affiliate members and community leaders to disseminate information effectively.

## IMPLICATIONS

### *Impact*

MdPHA plays a key role in advocating for state legislation that prioritizes the health of Marylanders, particularly in vulnerable communities. Its work intersects with environmental, economic, and social issues, addressing concerns such as air quality and health equity.

In recent years, public health funding has faced significant challenges, with numerous programs experiencing budget cuts and policy threats that undermine efforts to advance medical research, disease prevention, healthcare access, and community well-being. These reductions have placed increased strain on public health systems, limiting resources for addressing critical health disparities and emerging health threats. For example, the 2018 fiscal year budget proposed by US President Donald Trump included significant reductions in funding for medical and scientific research, public health initiatives, disease prevention programs, and health insurance assistance for low-income individuals and children.<sup>[21]</sup> MdPHA and other affiliates could face challenges such as limited funding and shifting political priorities. To ensure sustainability, the organization will continue to pursue grant opportunities, grow its membership, and engage public health professionals. Legislative progress can set a foundation for enhancing Maryland's health landscape and maintaining public health as a state priority.

### *Recommendations to Other Affiliates*

1. *Strengthen Partnerships*: Build strong partnerships with local advocacy and health organizations to amplify advocacy efforts and enhance public health practice.
2. *Focus on Capacity Building*: Support affiliate chapters with initiatives to enhance their capabilities and resources, improving their public health practice.
3. *Prioritize Training*: Invest in comprehensive training programs to empower community members and advocates, strengthening public health practice.
4. *Secure Funding*: Actively pursue funding opportunities to support public health and environmental initiatives, ensuring the sustainability of public health practice.

### *Broader Significance*

This manuscript contributes to the broader public health mission of reducing disparities by addressing social determinants of health, access to care, and systemic inequities, reinforcing state and national health equity initiatives. The publication also increases awareness among local organizations, policymakers, legislators, public health practitioners, healthcare providers, and the general public about pressing health issues in Maryland, potentially driving grassroots efforts and community-led solutions.

## CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS FOR TRANSLATION

MdPHA's primary endeavors revolved around strengthening public health practice, building a vibrant public health movement, and aligning resources and infrastructure to support those endeavors. Advocacy efforts in 2024 supported nearly 30 public health priorities, many of which were passed and enacted by the Maryland General Assembly, demonstrating the effectiveness of advocacy, training, and initiatives.

State public health affiliates have the potential to influence policy, inform public health practice, and add to the larger discourse on health equity.

### *Key Messages*

1) MdPHA is not only documenting its efforts but also amplifying the affiliate's impact beyond Maryland, influencing public health strategies at regional and national levels. 2) Public health practitioners, researchers, and students can learn from the affiliate's experiences, refining their own strategies and interventions to support their state public health affiliates in advancing health equity. 3) State public health associations can serve as an evidence-based resource to support legislative and funding decisions that promote health equity.

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## COMPLIANCE WITH ETHICAL STANDARDS

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