

Pathway Stepping Stones

A Step-by-Step Guide for Integrating Social Determinants of Health into Your Practice



The role of healthcare providers has been one of the central concerns in the continually increasing focus of integrating social determinants of health (SDH) into clinical care.

What can you do when your patients' underlying health issues are due to non-medical factors such as food and housing insecurity or pollution (i.e., social determinants of health)?

We understand that you have many pressures and responsibilities. The good news is there are solutions and partners to help. You, and the hospitals and clinics in which you practice, can effectively address SDH by following a few key steps outlined below.

KNOWLEDGE IS POWER ... *learn about the connections between SDH and their effects on health*

Discovering the connection between social-environmental conditions and your patient's health can help you understand the underlying causes and factors of their disease. Moreover, learning these connections can help you to determine the best treatments to prevent, cure, and mitigate diseases and illnesses.



To increase your knowledge we recommend the following online resources:

- ❖ [Healthy People 2020 – Social Determinants of Health](#)
- ❖ [CDC – Social Determinants of Health: Know What Affects Health](#)
- ❖ [Kaiser Family Foundation – Beyond Health Care: The Role of SDH](#)

MODIFY ... *your advice, treatment, and follow up*

Modify how you interact with your patients to increase the chances of better health outcomes and your patient's trust. By attending to SDH needs, you can help relieve your patient's financial and mental burdens, which may be causing, contributing to, or exacerbating their illness. Incorporating these practices may also have positive impacts on reimbursements as the industry continues to shift to value-based care.



Here are some examples of how to modify your actions:

- ❖ First, begin having a conversation with your patients about their SDH such as finances, housing, and food insecurity.
- ❖ If your patient is having financial difficulty, prescribe more affordable medicines and offer parking vouchers.
- ❖ Propose nutritional modifications that respect the patient's culture and offers a realistic path to better health.
- ❖ Identify a food pantry near the office or close to home for patients with food insecurity.
- ❖ Provide patients lacking transportation with prescriptions to a pharmacy near their home or your medical practice for convenience and connect them to providers of low-cost transportation.
- ❖ Some physicians have reinstated the time-honored tradition of home visits, which allows for quick assessments of housing conditions that may be contributing to health issues.

ASK THE PROS ... *connect with social workers and community outreach workers*

Develop working relationships with your social workers, community health workers, and/or community-based organizations who can connect your patients with the resources they need.



How?

- ❖ Invite them to your practice meetings to discuss your patients' needs and learn what resources are available to help.
- ❖ Make regular referrals to your social workers, community health workers and community-based organizations such as Baker Ripley, West Houston Area Ministries, and the Houston Food Bank.
- ❖ Similarly some practices have employed community health workers or care coordination teams to conduct community outreach and home care/assessments for patients.

EMBRACE ADVANCEMENTS ... *implement new and effective technology and practices*

The healthcare industry's incredible advances in techniques and technology could also be utilized as resources to address SDH.



Consider the following ideas:

- ❖ Invest in telehealth to care for patients with a lack of transportation or those who live in remote areas.
- ❖ Utilize SDH screening tools or the screening options available in your Electronic Medical Records (EMR) to track and help identify your patients' needs. Learn more about SDH clinical screening through our [Pathway SDH Guide](#)
- ❖ Utilize technology or work with organizations (e.g. PCIC) that aggregate population health data to better understand where SDH and health issues are occurring

BECOME AN ADVOCATE ... *participate in advocacy and/or community coalitions*

- ❖ Get involved with advocacy initiatives to further the implementation of SDH-related initiatives and policies. Consider working with your local health department, collaboratives (e.g. Healthy Living Matters), or organizations (e.g. Children at Risk).
- ❖ Form your own advocacy non-profit organizations (e.g. Doctors for Change) or participate in policy think tanks (e.g. Texas Medical Center Policy Institute, Baker Institute, Kinder Institute).
- ❖ Get involved with policy change initiatives. Make visits to the capital, participate in hearings, or help craft legislation focusing on SDH.
- ❖ Be an advocate in your workplace. See if your practice or organization already has SDH initiatives that you can join or support. If not, consider starting one.



If you would like additional advice and guidance on SDH from other providers and health administrators, please see the list of contacts in the [Pathway SDH Screening Guide](#) document.



ABOUT PATHWAYS STEPPING STONES

Pathway Stepping Stones is a publication of Harris County Public Health (HCPH) and Healthy Living Matters (a HCPH coalition).

HCPH would like to thank the following organizations for sharing their insights and advice: Baylor College of Medicine, Doctors for Change, DSRIP SDH Committee RHP3, Harris Health System, Memorial Hermann Health System, Texas Children's Hospital Center for Child Health Policy and Advocacy, Texas Children's Hospital Section of Public Health and Primary Care, University of Houston College of Medicine, UTHealth