



Why systems change?

Systems change is a concept that refers to making significant and lasting improvements to the underlying structures, policies, and practices that contribute to a particular issue or problem. Instead of focusing on addressing symptoms or offering short-term solutions, systems change aims to transform the root causes that perpetuate those problems and keep people in the same circumstances that require services.

For example: If a community organization is working to combat hunger in a community, providing food relief to those in need is important. However, systems change asks the questions: will this service help fix any of the underlying causes linked to food insecurity? Why do people keep coming back/what keeps them in this cycle of need? What can we do to decrease the need? Systems change goes beyond distributing food; it involves examining and altering the root causes of hunger, such as poverty, unemployment, and/or food access.

By influencing change in the systems that perpetuate the root causes of issues, we can create sustainable, long-term solutions. Supported by research conducted in the social services sector (social work, sociology, politics, etc.) over several decades and then applied to the philanthropic sector more than ten years ago, grant-making should align with systems-level approaches to addressing social problems and barriers if equity and long-term impact is to be achieved. Systems-level change needs to be intentional, deliberate, researched, in partnership and collaboration with other organizations, and planned over a span of time. To be successful, systems change must always be reflective of the needs of the community and actively work to change the components and structures that allow broken systems to continue to function.

F4HE's definition of systems change:

Systems level change, as defined by Foundation for Health Equity, is focused on addressing root causes of social issues, beyond direct service, by changing key factors that negatively impact the system and continue to perpetuate cycles of dysfunction and inequity. The Foundation is invested in systems level change that increases opportunities for everyone to live the healthiest life possible. To that end, the Foundation prioritizes supporting organizations addressing systemic health inequities through planning and implementation of the following three areas:

- Addresses policies, procedures, practices and/or cultures related to the system being challenged.

- Requesting insight and acting upon input from those affected by the system being challenged.
- Is meant to improve health outcomes for all who are affected by the system being challenged.

What we are looking for:

- All 3 elements of systems change are addressed.
- The systems work is directly related to health and clients affected.
- The systems change work is embedded in the organization; it is part of the organization's DNA and is intentional.
- Systems change work is done on a regular or daily basis.
- The systems work is clear, defined, achievable and ongoing. There is noted success or progress in the systems change work being done.
- How are you working yourself out of a job?

These are not considered strong in F4HE's definition of systems change:

Organizations commonly report systems change work as outreach/education, community involvement, one-time events, invitation, or attendance of conferences/meetings, and addressing barriers to services.