

SIX WAYS TO TALK ABOUT SOCIAL DETERMINANTS OF HEALTH:

Our hope in this research was to find a tidy proxy that could replace “the social determinants of health” as the leading descriptor for this area of work. While our testing showed that this phrase doesn’t work for any of our audiences, we still don’t have that neat replacement. But what you’ll find here is a list of phrases that—in context—helped people understand the concept more clearly. These are the precise phrases that we tested and that scored well.

- 1 Health starts—long before illness—in our homes, schools and jobs.
- 2 All Americans should have the opportunity to make the choices that allow them to live a long, healthy life, regardless of their income, education or ethnic background.
- 3 Your neighborhood or job shouldn’t be hazardous to your health.
- 4 Your opportunity for health starts long before you need medical care.
- 5 Health begins where we live, learn, work and play.
- 6 The opportunity for health begins in our families, neighborhoods, schools and jobs.

WHY THESE WORK:

- The proxy statements use colloquial, values-driven language and relatable lifestyle references that engage audiences.
- These statements all focus on the solution versus the problem.
- Some of the statements implicitly acknowledge the notion of personal responsibility.

A GLOSSARY OF “OTHER TERMS”

The terms that people often use to describe health disparities can get in the way of others accepting the idea of social determinants of health and who they are most likely to affect. One of the things we learned from OZA’s research is that people with more conservative views tend to have negative reactions to the goal of equal levels of health for everyone. As such, below are some phrases we suggest avoiding.

- Any variation of equal, equality or equalizing
- Leveling the playing field
- Creating balance

People with a more liberal perspective on this issue often describe health disparities as an injustice, whereas more conservative people never use this phrase. Though it was never commented on directly in the OZA health disparities research, we suspect that the idea of health differences being unjust would not resonate with conservative audiences because it may activate the same response as inequality. This would include the following type of language, which you should also avoid:

- Unjust/injustice
- Immoral
- Outrage
- Unconscionable

A GLOSSARY OF “OTHER TERMS” (continued)

Below is an evolving list of terms that describe the groups most profoundly affected by this issue. These descriptions are not only technically accurate but more representative of how we relate to each other as human beings and fellow Americans. These phrases have not been tested, but are reflective of the insights we gained from the research.

Vulnerable Populations

- Too many Americans don't have the same opportunities to be as healthy as others
- Americans who face significant barriers to better health
- People whose circumstances have made them vulnerable to poor health
- All Americans should have the opportunity to make the choices that allow them to live a long, healthy life, regardless of their income, education, or ethnic background
- Our opportunities to better health begin where we live, learn, work and play
- People's health is significantly affected by their homes, jobs and schools

Health Disparities

- Raising the bar for everyone
- Setting a fair and adequate baseline of care for all
- Lifting everyone up
- Giving everyone a chance to live a healthy life
- Unfair
- Not right

- Disappointing (as in Americans should be able to do better, not let people fall through the cracks)
- It's time we made it possible for all Americans to afford to see a doctor, but it's also time we made it less likely that they need to

Poverty

- Families who can't afford the basics in life
- Americans who struggle financially
- Americans struggling to get by

Low-income workers and families

- People who work for a living and still can't pay their rent
- Hard-working Americans who have gotten squeezed out of the middle class in tough times
- Families whose dreams are being foreclosed

Violence in general, as well as gangs and intimate partner violence

- Unsafe streets
- The epidemic of violence
- Street violence
- Intergenerational cycle of violence and abuse
- Teen dating violence and abuse

The elderly population and their families, nursing homes and elder care

- Our aging parents and grandparents
- Our elders
- Elders
- Caring for people as they age

Refugees and immigrants including children

- People seeking a new home in America
- Children caught between two worlds
- From undocumented immigrants to productive, tax-paying American citizens

Youth and teens

- The years of opportunity and danger
- Teenagers: They aren't just young adults

Mental health or illness, including young people

- It's just as dangerous and debilitating as any other chronic disease

Lowe, J.I. (2010). A new way to talk about the social determinants of health. Vulnerable Populations Portfolio: www.rwjf.org/vulnerablepopulations/rwjf3023.pdf.

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