Idaho is fortunate to have many assets — inspiring natural resources, warm people, and a friendly business environment — that draw visitors and new residents from all over and are a source of pride for its people. Lifelong Idahoans and new residents like the prospect of a vibrant, thriving, and resilient future experienced by all state residents. What are the challenges that stand in the way of that future, and more importantly, what can the people of Idaho do about it?

Social and economic conditions are key drivers of individual and community health. The conditions that affect health in Idaho are the same conditions that affect the overall well-being of the state and can either threaten or bolster its future. The key to achieving that future is intentionally and consistently fostering the building blocks of that future — the social determinants of health. The social determinants of health refer to the conditions in which people are born, grow, live, work, and age (see Figure 1 below). These are the social and economic conditions that play a primary role in shaping the health of individuals, families, and entire communities and regions.

Figure 1. Social Determinants of Health

THE SOCIAL DETERMINANTS of health refer to the conditions in which people are born, grow, live, work, and age.
ECONOMIC STABILITY:
Idahoans need a dynamic economy where they can earn good wages, remain employed, and meet their basic needs. Over the past decade, Idaho has enjoyed strong and steady economic growth, yet many Idahoans struggle to cover necessary expenses. Families are forgoing basic needs — food, transportation, medical care, and housing — which is detrimental to their health. Some groups, such as person of color and single-parent households are more likely to experience financial strain. Now might be a unique moment to address gaps for marginalized Idahoans, while benefiting the state as a whole.

EDUCATION:
The opportunity to attain high-quality education from early childhood through post-secondary is essential to access jobs in Idaho’s evolving economy. However, from very young ages, many of Idaho’s children do not have access to the educational experiences they need for lifelong success. Idaho’s underfunded and underperforming K-12 education system leaves many behind, placing them at higher risk for poor health outcomes. Half of Idaho’s incoming kindergarteners aren’t prepared to succeed in school. Post-secondary credentials are becoming increasingly important to securing a living-wage job. Removing barriers to education can bolster the state’s workforce while improving health.

SOCIAL & COMMUNITY CONTEXT:
Individual and community health requires a robust social fabric that promotes connection and belonging. Idaho is a place where people feel connected and support one another, which promotes health. However, not all groups are knit into this fabric as firmly. Latino, Native American, refugee, LGBTQ+, rural, and low-income families face social exclusion, which makes it less likely that they can lead healthy, happy, and successful lives and fully support Idaho’s economic vitality. Idaho’s youngest residents are particularly vulnerable to the stresses of a fraying social fabric. Idaho’s current and future competitiveness is dependent on its residents’ relationships with each other and with their communities.

NEIGHBORHOOD & BUILT ENVIRONMENT:
The physical environments where Idahoans live — from their home to their neighborhood — have a significant impact on health and well-being. High-quality environments including safe housing and neighborhoods that promote physical activity and access to healthy, affordable food, lead to healthy communities. In many ways, Idaho’s neighborhoods and environments support health by providing access to parks, playgrounds, and recreation centers. Population growth is increasing challenges related to housing, transportation, and access to healthy food. Some built environments in Idaho put residents at greater risk of poor health outcomes. Thoughtfully designed communities will enable all Idahoans to get and stay healthy and help sustain the state’s rapid economic growth that relies on engaged and productive residents.
ACCESS TO HEALTH CARE:
Access to affordable, high-quality primary care and behavioral health services is essential to the health and well-being of all Idahoans. Idaho has a severe shortage of primary care physicians and mental health providers. Communities of color and rural Idahoans are most severely affected by access and affordability barriers. Additionally, poor access to care can exacerbate mental and behavioral health challenges. Despite these issues, some leaders and organizations have begun to address access challenges in innovative ways.

Improving health care access in a lasting way requires “moving upstream” to the ultimate causes of poor health by creating conditions that support health and reducing demand for services.

These interconnected challenges are not insurmountable. Idaho has already been testing innovative solutions to these issues. Collaboration rooted in a commitment to align the resources of multisection partners is required. Specifically, Idahoans can work collectively to address the social determinants of health and ensure no one is left behind. Organizations will need to align goals, strategies, and resources. We must recognize the social determinants of health are interconnected and need to be addressed holistically to create a vibrant, thriving, and resilient future.

There are three mutually reinforcing strategic opportunities to address the social determinants of health:

1. Connect Health and Human Services. Coordinated partnerships to address individual, population, and community-level, health-related social needs;

2. Foster Community Capacity to Address Key Challenges. A “bottom-up” approach of authentic engagement and mobilization of members across all of Idaho’s communities – especially those who have been historically marginalized;

3. Align Public Policy to Promote Health and Well-being. A “top-down” approach of aligning public policy at the state and local levels with a vision for improving the social and economic well-being, and health of all Idahoans.

If people in Idaho set a shared intention, they can create a vibrant, thriving, and resilient future for the state and improve health and well-being at the same time. Idaho’s organizations can work across sectors through coordination and partnership to foster an equitable distribution of the social and economic building blocks of health and improve conditions in which Idahoans are born, grow, live, work, and age.

"Idaho is moving forward at a faster rate than the rest of the country. We need to capture these opportunities now."

GOVERNOR BRAD LITTLE
OPPORTUNITIES FOR BUILDING A HEALTHIER IDAHO

STRATEGIC OPPORTUNITY 1

FOSTER COMMUNITY CAPACITY

Engage a diverse group of stakeholders
Set a shared vision
Create a structure
Mobilize resources and implement
Build feedback loops and regularly reassess

Screen for social needs, refer to social services, and track uptake
Provide coordinated and complementary services
Jointly staff and finance services
Address community-wide social needs

STRATEGIC OPPORTUNITY 2

CONNECT HEALTH & HUMAN SERVICES

Build capacity of champions to engage
Engage diverse stakeholders
Support cross-sector collaboration
Change decision-making structures and processes

STRATEGIC OPPORTUNITY 3

ALIGN PUBLIC POLICY TO PROMOTE HEALTH AND WELL-BEING