The Colorado Health Foundation™

Power Shows Up in More Than One Way. And So Can We

Put simply, power is the ability to shape decisions. At The Colorado Health Foundation, we know health is a reflection of how power works in our communities. Who gets heard. Whose priorities shape policy. What future feels possible or out of reach.

One framework that helps make this visible is the Three Faces of Power, For those of us working to advance health equity, this framework offers more than theory. It provides a practical map for building community power and shifting the conditions that determine what is possible, for whom, and at what cost.

Power You Can See: Visible Power

The first face of power is the most familiar. It's what shows up in city council chambers, legislative hearings, ballot measures, and public campaigns.

Visible power is about how and why decisions are made in real time. It includes organizing communities to advocate for policy change, conducting research that informs public debate, registering voters, building relationships with elected officials, and mobilizing people around specific proposals.

Visible power matters because policies shape whether families can afford housing, whether communities have access to the types of health care that they need, and whether economic security is within reach. But policy wins rarely happen in isolation, the process of decision making should be transparent to those impacted

by policy decisions.

Power Behind the Scenes: Hidden Power

Hidden power shapes who even gets a seat at the table and which topics are considered serious enough to address.

It operates in the rules of engagement: who is invited into decision-making spaces, how agendas are set, and which community voices are treated as credible. It also lives in long-term relationships, alliances, and the infrastructure—networks, resources, and institutions—that make it possible for advocates and organizations to sustain their work over time.

Building hidden power requires investment in collective capacity. It means strengthening networks, supporting community-led organizations, and fostering durable partnerships across sectors. When communities have the infrastructure and alignment to act together, they are better positioned to respond to decisions and shape them.

Power in the Air We Breathe: Invisible Power

The third face of power is the least visible and often the most enduring.

Invisible power shapes how we make sense of the world around us. It influences what we believe about responsibility, fairness, belonging, and what is possible. It determines whether we see health inequities as the result of individual choices or as the predictable outcome of systems and structures.

This is where narrative lives.

Narratives are the big stories that shape how people understand the world, what causes problems, who is responsible, and what solutions feel possible.

When dominant narratives reinforce scarcity, individualism, or blame, they narrow what policymakers and the public believe can be done. When narratives lift up shared well-being, fair opportunity, belonging, and possibility, they expand our collective imagination.

Shifting invisible power means shaping the story environment itself. It means activating core values, elevating trusted community voices, and aligning communications across sectors so that messages consistently reinforce beliefs that support health equity.

Why All Three Faces Matter

Power is dynamic and interconnected. Policy, advocacy, and education campaigns without infrastructure struggle to last. Infrastructure without supporting narratives can be dismissed by the public. Narrative shifts without policy action can stall sustainable progress.

To tackle the root causes of health inequities, communities need to organize across all three faces of power:

- **Win concrete policy changes.**
- **Build long-term collective capacity and access to decision-making.**
- **Shift the underlying narratives that shape what feels achievable.**

This integrated approach moves us beyond short-term fixes and toward long-term solutions.

From Framework to Practice

For organizers, funders, and advocates, the Three Faces of Power framework offers a way to pinpoint power imbalances and design strategies that level the playing field.

At the Foundation, we see our role not as directing what communities say or do, but as helping build the infrastructure that allows aligned efforts to reinforce one another. That includes investing in trusted community voices, strengthening grassroots capacity, supporting policy advocacy, and advancing narrative approaches that uplift shared responsibility and long-term solutions.

When communities are organized across visible, hidden, and invisible power, they are better positioned to shape decisions — not just respond to them.

Health equity is not achieved by a single policy, a single organization, or a single story. It is achieved when people have the power to influence decisions, shape agendas, and define the narratives that guide our collective future towards health equity.

And power, in all its forms, is something we can build together.

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