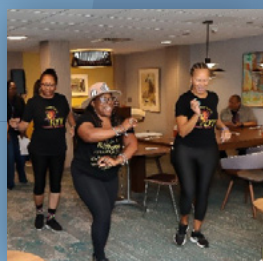


UConn HEALTH

HEALTH DISPARITIES
INSTITUTE



UConn Health Disparities Institute

FY'26 Annual Report (July 2025–June 2026)

UConn HEALTH

HEALTH DISPARITIES
INSTITUTE

Our mission is to advance systemic change by tackling root causes of health inequities and implementing sustainable solutions through interdisciplinary community-based participatory research partnerships, data-driven community action, and workforce development efforts with communities disproportionately impacted by inequities.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction	1
A Letter from the Director	3
HDI in the Community	5
COHI Partnership	7
Black Maternal Health	8
Menopause Equity Initiative	10
Linguistic Inclusion	17
HDI 2025-2026 Funding	19
HDI Faculty Spotlight	20
Education & Training	24
Legislative Session Report	26

Introduction

This year, the Health Disparities Institute (HDI) at UConn Health has successfully expanded its reach and connections across the state in service to its vision and mission. HDI's increased visibility across UConn Health, UConn, and Connecticut has led to measurable successes that have advanced its strategic goals, which are to:

- 1 Establish HDI as the primary hub for initiating and supporting community driven health equity research and action in Connecticut.
- 2 Catalyze systemic change at the organizational, municipal, and state levels to confront and dismantle racism.
- 3 Deliver applied educational experiences that advance health equity and enhance critical consciousness among learners at all levels.

HDI's work in health equity has played a critical role in advancing the brand and reputation of UConn Health. HDI staff and faculty efforts, engagement, and partnerships with communities across Connecticut have been featured in the media, further elevating the profile of both HDI and UConn Health. Over this year, HDI's reach has included a broad range of community, academic, and legislative audiences and partners.

Through education, research, training, and scholarly engagement, HDI reached more than 9,500 people across Connecticut this year. Our community education programs and collaborations reached approximately 6,500 residents, reflecting both the depth of our partnerships and the trust communities place in HDI's work. Statewide assessments and research dissemination engaged an additional 1,500 people,

Outreach in FY'26

Community Education Programs and Collaborations
~ 6,500 residents

Student Training and CME Programs
~320 residents



Statewide Assessments and Research Dissemination
1,500 residents

Shared Scholarship
~1,200 residents

helping advance equity centered policy conversations and strengthen the evidence base for systems change. HDI advanced its commitment to developing the next generation of equity-minded leaders by reaching an estimated 320 learners through student training and CME programs.

Our faculty and staff also shared their scholarship with more than 1,200 participants, elevating community priorities and contributing to statewide and national dialogues on health equity. Taken together, these efforts reflect HDI's expansive reach and sustained impact in advancing health equity across communities, institutions, and systems throughout Connecticut.

What's Inside This Year's Report

This year's report showcases the depth, breadth, and impact of HDI's work across Connecticut, bringing forward the stories, partnerships, and people driving progress in health equity through research, education, community engagement, and policy leadership.

Across these pages, readers will find:

1 A Letter from the Director: A reflection on HDI's growth, statewide reach, and the collective momentum driving our mission forward.

2 HDI in the Community: A narrative of our presence across Connecticut, from cultural events and community forums to statewide policy convenings, highlighting how HDI shows up with intention, partnership, and purpose.

3 COHI Partnership: A feature on HDI's collaboration with the Connecticut Oral Health Initiative, highlighting shared advocacy, community engagement, and equity-driven systems work.

4 Black Maternal Health: An update on HDI's ongoing work to confront racial inequities in maternal health outcomes, elevate community voices, and support statewide policy change.

5 Menopause Equity Initiative: A deep dive into HDI's statewide leadership on menopause equity, including community education, legislative engagement, and culturally grounded programming. Readers can explore this work further in the featured story in this issue and in the online report.

6 Linguistic Inclusion: A look at our efforts to advance language justice and ensure that health systems, research, and policy spaces are accessible to all communities.

7 HDI 2025–2026 Funding: A summary of HDI's extramural funding activity.

8 Student and Faculty Spotlight: Profiles of emerging and established leaders whose scholarship, community work, and advocacy embody HDI's commitment to equity-centered learning and practice.

9 Legislative Session Report: A summary of HDI's policy engagement throughout the legislative session, including testimony, coalition work, and equity-centered policy priorities.

Taken together, these efforts reflect HDI's expansive reach and sustained impact in advancing health equity across communities, institutions, and systems throughout Connecticut.

A Letter from the Director

This year has been one of profound growth, visibility, and impact for the Health Disparities Institute. As we reflect on FY26, I am struck by how deeply our work continues to be shaped by the communities we serve and by the urgency of advancing health equity through research, education, community engagement, and policy action. HDI has always been committed to enhancing research and health care for medically underserved and minoritized populations, but this year we stepped even more fully into our role as a statewide leader in reimagining health care, strengthening community voice, and driving systems change.

Our reach expanded dramatically. Through education, research, training, and scholarly engagement, HDI connected with more than 9,500 people across Connecticut, including 6,500 residents through community education programs and collaborations. As the attached report notes, HDI's work in health equity has played a critical role in advancing the brand and reputation of UConn Health, reflecting the trust communities place in our work and the visibility our efforts have brought to the institution. This year, HDI showed up across neighborhoods, cultural spaces, policy forums, and statewide convenings, demonstrating that equity is built through proximity, partnership, and sustained engagement.

Our portfolio expanded significantly, with major initiatives in linguistic inclusion, menopause equity, oral health equity, and maternal health equity. These efforts are not simply projects; they are pathways toward justice. They reflect the lived experiences of women, families, and communities across Connecticut who have long been excluded from research, care, and decision making. Through research translation, legislative engagement, statewide partnerships, and community driven inquiry, HDI is helping ensure these voices are



not only heard but centered in the decisions that shape their health and well being.

This year also marked a turning point in our policy impact. HDI's Menopause Equity Initiative helped advance two historic bills that became law, including legislation directing the state to develop a provider toolkit for menopause care and clarifying that menopausal symptoms can qualify for workplace accommodations. HDI's leadership in research translation, testimony, and coalition building helped transform community priorities into statewide policy change.

Our commitment to community engaged research was visible across initiatives from the Black Maternal Health Initiative in Fairfield County, to the COHI oral health

partnership, to PA'LANTE and Voces Unidas Para Salud, which are reshaping how Connecticut's health systems honor linguistic inclusion and language justice. These efforts demonstrate what is possible when communities lead, when language is honored, and when systems respond to those most impacted by inequities.

We also celebrated the creativity and commitment of our students and fellows, whose projects continue to demonstrate the power of applied learning rooted in equity. Their work from community assessments to policy briefs to innovative research strengthens our mission and expands our reach. HDI's growing team of faculty and staff further amplified this momentum, bringing new expertise, new energy, and new vision to our collective efforts.

This year, HDI's work reached a broader audience than ever before. Our media presence, statewide partnerships, and legislative engagement reflect a growing understanding that health equity is not optional; it is essential. I am proud of the ways HDI continues to lead with integrity, rigor, and accountability to our communities.

As we look ahead, we remain committed to advancing research that is culturally grounded, policy relevant,

and community driven. We will continue to push for systems that honor linguistic diversity, support women across the lifespan, strengthen maternal health equity, and ensure equitable care for every Connecticut resident. We will continue to invest in students, build partnerships, and elevate the voices of those most impacted by inequities. And we will continue to stand firm in our belief that health equity is achievable, not someday, but through the work we do together now.

Thank you to our partners, students, faculty, staff, and community members who make this work possible. HDI's impact reflects your commitment, your courage, and your vision for a more just Connecticut.

Warmly,



Linda Sprague Martinez, PhD
Professor, Departments of Medicine
and Applied Public Health Sciences
Director, Health Disparities Institute
University of Connecticut School of Medicine



HDI has always been committed to enhancing research and health care for medically underserved and minoritized populations, but this year we stepped even more fully into our role as a statewide leader in reimaging health care, strengthening community voice, and driving systems change.



HDI in the Community:

Advancing Equity Through Presence, Partnership, and Power Building

Over this year, the Health Disparities Institute (HDI) strengthened its presence across Connecticut, showing up in neighborhoods, community centers, cultural spaces, policy forums, and statewide conversations about equity. This presence reflects more than participation; it embodies our belief that advancing health equity requires proximity, partnership, and sustained engagement with the people and organizations driving change on the ground.

Strengthening Community Voice Through Education and Connection

HDI's menopause equity work continued to expand, reaching women, families, UConn alumni, and legislators through culturally grounded educational events. From Rooted in Wisdom: A Menopause Garden Party in July 2025 to Power of the Pause, Men of the Pause, and HDI-led sessions for UConn alumni and lawmakers, these programs created trusted spaces where women and their loved ones could learn, connect, and advocate for themselves. Together, these gatherings helped normalize conversations about menopause, while elevating the lived experiences of women who have long been overlooked in research and care.

Readers can explore this work in greater depth in the featured menopause equity story in this issue and in the online Menopause Equity Initiative report, which more fully highlights HDI's statewide leadership in menopause justice

HDI also showed up at community celebrations and forums that center belonging, identity, and wellbeing. At the 2026 Black Family Wellness Expo, the team connected with families, shared resources, and supported community driven health promotion. HDI also attended

Ruby's Realm, a vibrant community production celebrating Black creativity, healing, and collective joy. The event underscored the importance of cultural spaces as sites of health equity, places where storytelling, art, and community expression strengthen resilience and connection.

Through additional engagements with partners such as Make the Road CT, the Hispanic Health Council, and the YWCA, HDI continued to build relationships with organizations advancing justice for immigrant communities, families of color, and women across the state.

Building Power Through Data, Advocacy, and Community Leadership

A major highlight of the year was HDI's partnership with the Institute for Community Research (ICR) on a community power building grant. In collaboration with Dr. Jean Schensul and Ms. Candida Flores, and with support from the Greater Hartford Gives Foundation, HDI helped convene a collective of five community-based organizations engaged in co-learning, shared problem-solving, and mutual capacity building. Rather than using a traditional training model, the program centered collective wisdom: organizations learned from one another, built skills together, and strengthened their advocacy efforts through shared experience.

Through this collaborative structure, participants deepened their ability to use data to tell their stories, advance community priorities, and shape policy conversations. This work reflects HDI's commitment to democratizing the research process and ensuring that communities have the tools, confidence, and collective power to influence decisions that affect their health and wellbeing.

Showing Up in Statewide Equity Conversations

Throughout the year, HDI participated in a broad range of statewide equity conversations, far more than can be captured individually, reflecting our role as a trusted voice in Connecticut's health equity landscape. Our ongoing collaboration with the Aurora Foundation included participation in the **Luminary Event, Women's Leadership Forum, Young Women's Initiative Celebration, and the Annual Meeting**, each bringing together leaders across sectors to advance women's health, leadership, and economic opportunity.

We also joined partners at the **Hispanic Health Council Maternal Health Convening**, the **Connecticut Oral Health Initiative's 25th Anniversary Gathering**, and the **YWCA's In the Company of Women Luncheon**. These gatherings strengthened cross-sector partnerships and helped ensure that health equity remained central to statewide policy and practice.

HDI faculty and staff shared their expertise at local forums, legislative events, and statewide convenings throughout the year. The team delivered numerous presentations at the Connecticut Public Health Association (CPHA) Annual Meeting, contributing research, policy insights, and community-engaged approaches to one of the state's largest public health gatherings.

A major statewide highlight was **Health Equity Week**, led by **Health Equity Solutions (HES)**. HDI partnered with HES on this week-long policy event brought together advocates, legislators, researchers, and community leaders to advance equity centered policy solutions across Connecticut. HDI's leadership helped elevate community priorities and strengthen momentum for statewide systems change.

Celebrating Research, Students, and Community Collaboration

HDI's commitment to community-engaged research was visible throughout the year. At the **2026 Health Equity Research Symposium & Poster Session**, students, faculty, and community partners showcased collaborative projects that reflect HDI's values: rigor, cultural humility, and community accountability. Additional student-led work, from community assessments to policy briefs, continued to expand HDI's reach and impact across Connecticut.

A Year of Presence, Partnership, and Purpose

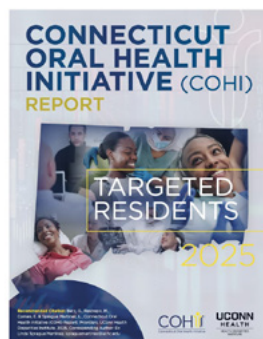
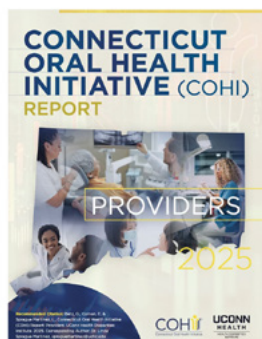
Across more than two dozen events, from garden parties and community expos to legislative forums and statewide convenings, HDI showed up with intention. Each engagement strengthened relationships, expanded our reach, and advanced our three strategic priorities: transforming systems, building community power, and expanding culturally responsive research and education.

HDI's community presence is not an add-on to our work; it is the heart of our mission. It reflects our belief that equity is built through connection, collaboration, and the courage to meet people where they are. This year, we did exactly that, and we will continue to do so in the years ahead.



Advancing Oral Health Equity through Community Partnership

In 2023, the Connecticut Oral Health Initiative (COHI) was contracted to assess HUSKY Dental providers' and Connecticut residents' knowledge of and experiences with the HUSKY Dental program. In the summer of 2025, COHI approached the UConn Health Disparities Institute (HDI) for support with data analysis and report development, an important reflection of HDI's growing role as a trusted resource for community organizations seeking rigorous, equity focused research.



COHI led the statewide data collection, conducting surveys and community forums with residents and dental providers across Connecticut. Four hundred residents participated in the survey, and twenty community forums were held. Among providers, twenty seven dental providers completed the survey, and four provider forums were conducted. HDI analyzed the quantitative and qualitative data and produced two companion reports focused on resident experiences and provider perspectives.

1. Resident report: ef

2. Provider report: https://health.uconn.edu/health-disparities/wp-content/uploads/sites/260/2026/04/cohi_report_providers_3d42.pdf

The findings revealed that oral health challenges

extend far beyond access to dental services, affecting individuals' physical health, mental well being, and daily quality of life. Residents described pain, worsening health conditions, difficulty eating and sleeping, diminished self confidence, and social isolation. Many also reported dental anxiety, stigma, and confusion navigating a complex dental care system. Transportation barriers, limited provider availability, uncertainty about covered benefits, and unexpected out of pocket costs frequently prevent individuals from obtaining needed care.

Providers echoed many of these concerns, pointing to systemic barriers that shape both patient access and care delivery. They highlighted low reimbursement rates, administrative burdens, delays related to prior authorization, and challenges with provider credentialing. These issues were seen as major contributors to limited appointment availability and reduced provider participation in HUSKY Dental. Providers also emphasized the need for stronger care coordination, clearer communication with patients, and expanded translation, interpretation, and transportation services.

Through COHI's community forums, residents and providers also shared practical recommendations for strengthening the HUSKY Dental program, from clearer information about benefits and expanded coverage to reduced administrative barriers, improved coordination, and increased reimbursement rates. The COHI-HDI partnership generated actionable evidence that can guide policymakers and health system leaders working to improve oral health outcomes in Connecticut. By combining community voices, provider expertise, and rigorous analysis, this project demonstrates the value of research partnerships and highlights HDI's growing role as a statewide resource for organizations committed to advancing health equity.

The Black Maternal Health Initiative

This year, Dr. Linda Barry, HDI Associate Director, received a new grant from Fairfield County Community Foundation to launch the Black Maternal Health Initiative (BMHI), a community driven effort designed to confront persistent racial inequities in maternal and infant health outcomes affecting Black birthing people and families in Fairfield County. The initiative demonstrates increasing recognition of HDI as a statewide leader in community driven research, cross sector collaboration, and systems level action.

Building a Community Driven Foundation for Systems Change

In its first phase, BMHI centered deep listening, relationship building, and systems alignment. HDI convened Black birthing families, doulas, community health workers (CHW), healthcare institutions, advocacy groups, and public health leaders to identify barriers to equitable maternity care and opportunities to strengthen community based support systems.

A comprehensive needs assessment and SWOT analysis surfaced four community defined priorities:

- Expanding access to community-responsive integrated doula and CHW services
- Elevating community voice in decision making
- Strengthening coordination among participating organizations
- Building sustainable infrastructure for long term systems change

These priorities now anchor the implementation strategy and exemplify the commitment of HDI to research that begins and centers the community voice.

Implementation: Turning Community Priorities into Action

With foundational planning complete, BMHI has entered an implementation phase focused on transforming maternal health systems, services, and outcomes. HDI facilitates a robust cross sector coalition that brings together clinicians, community based organizations, birth workers, advocates, and public health partners around a shared vision for maternal health equity.

Early implementation efforts include:

- Strengthening workforce pathways for dual certified doulas and community health workers
- Advancing collaboration between clinicians and community based birth workers
- Developing accountability and evaluation structures
- Increasing public awareness of maternal health inequities and the value of community based birth support

These coordinated actions address systemic drivers of maternal and infant health disparities, highlighting the leadership of HDI in mobilizing community centered solutions.

Evaluation, Accountability, and Continuous Learning

The evaluation framework of BMHI supports coalition accountability, monitors partner progress, and assesses implementation effectiveness. This continuous learning approach ensures alignment with the initiative's overarching goal: improving outcomes for Black birthing people and their infants. It also generates insights that



OUR PURPOSE

The **Black Maternal Health Initiative** aims to eliminate systemic racism and implicit bias embedded in the healthcare system that leads to disparate outcomes for Black women in Fairfield County.



PROGRAM DELIVERY

The initiative promotes dignity, trust, bodily autonomy, and relationship-based care for Black mothers by providing culturally competent support from doulas.



PROGRAM SCOPE

The program's overarching goals are to improve maternal health outcomes for Black mothers and Black babies, strengthen the local birthing workforce by training, and hiring more doulas, and advocate for much-needed health system and legislative changes that will produce better maternal health outcomes.

will inform future maternal health equity efforts across Fairfield County and the state.

Building Sustainable, Community Led Systems

BMHI is intentionally designed to outlast the current funding period. By strengthening collaboration among healthcare institutions, community organizations, birth workers, advocates, and residents, the initiative is building durable systems capable of advancing maternal health equity for years to come.

Grounded in the voices and experiences of Black birthing people, BMHI ensures that implementation remains responsive to community identified needs

and accountable to those most affected by inequities. Through sustained partnership, evaluation, and community engagement, BMHI is laying the foundation for lasting, community informed systems change.

The Role of HDI: Connecticut's Leader in Community Driven Research and Action

BMHI exemplifies the strategic vision of HDI. By leading this initiative, HDI strengthens its statewide impact, expands community partnerships, and advances equity centered systems change, solidifying its position as Connecticut's leader in community driven research, policy engagement, and action.

The Story of HDI's Menopause Equity Initiative

"This was the first time I ever had a real conversation about menopause." A participant said this at Rooted in Wisdom, a community-led garden party in Middletown. Her comment explains why the UConn Health Disparities Institute's Menopause Equity Initiative (MEI) exists. Too many people were reaching midlife without the information, language, or care to understand what was happening to their bodies. HDI treated that gap as a starting point, not a footnote, and by listening first, helped turn a rarely discussed transition into a growing statewide conversation about equity, dignity, and systems change.

Listening First, Acting Second

The initiative began in late 2024, when community partners described entering perimenopause and menopause without adequate information or support. Many could not recognize symptoms, find knowledgeable providers, understand treatment options, or feel taken seriously. HDI responded by listening to these concerns and creating spaces for community members, clinicians, educators, advocates, researchers, and policymakers to learn from each other.

Early conversations revealed that while menopause is universal, experiences vary widely. Factors such as race, culture, income, insurance, language, workplace conditions, and provider access influence whose symptoms are recognized and treated. Early or medically induced menopause brings additional challenges. For those managing chronic illness, disability, caregiving, inflexible jobs, or mistrust in the health system, facing menopause in silence further deepens inequities.

A Movement Begins

On May 3, 2025, more than 100 women attended Breaking the Silence on Menopause at Connecticut's Legislative Office Building. Co-hosted with the General Assembly's Commission on Women, Children, Seniors, Equity, and Opportunity (CWSCEO), the event featured a screening of *The (M) Factor: Shredding the Silence on Menopause* and a panel discussion moderated by CWS-



CEO Executive Director Melvette Hill. Panelists included UConn/UConn Health providers Dr. Ivy M. Alexander, Dr. Jessica Kluewer-D'Amico, and Dr. Feier Liu; and Dr. Carla Rae-Gunn Samson, Clinical Director of Women's Health, Community Health Services, Inc. They discussed the medical, psychological, and cultural aspects of menopause, while audience members shared personal experiences. The event highlighted the need for trustworthy education, culturally responsive care, and open dialogue.

To build on this momentum, HDI formed the Menopause Equity Collective (MEC), a 15-member, diverse network of community residents, clinicians, advocates, educators, researchers, and organizational partners. The MEC guides outreach, community learning, policy advocacy, fundraising, and resource development, ensuring the initiative remains aligned with community priorities.

This shared leadership resulted in programming tailored to specific communities and needs. At Rooted in Wisdom, nearly 80 women gathered at the Community Health Center, Inc. in Middletown, CT for an event by and for women of color. Co-hosts DeLita Rose-Daniels



(MEC) and Yvette Highsmith, vice president of the Community Health Center's Eastern Region, organized an afternoon focused on learning, connection, and renewal. Dr. Rae-Gunn Samson and Dr. Kluewer-D'Amico addressed common misconceptions in a clinical discussion, while Gullah Geechee herbalist Sasha Allen Walton linked cultural healing practices to everyday wellness. Participants left viewing menopause as a "second spring," a time of renewal and wisdom.

Bringing the Conversation to the Capitol

On October 13, 2025, the initiative engaged Connecticut legislators through a virtual screening of *The (M) Factor: Shredding the Silence on Menopause*, co-hosted with State Representative Kai Belton, serving the 100th District. Women legislators from both parties shared their experiences with menopause, highlighting the need for improved provider education and more accessible, responsive care. This gathering set a precedent by demonstrating that lived experience can elevate menopause to a bipartisan policy priority.



A Statewide Celebration of Midlife

Momentum continued at the Power of the Pause Celebration, where over 300 people gathered at the Mandell JCC of Greater Hartford for a day of health education, provider access, movement, music, and community resources. Award-winning DJ Q-Boogie welcomed the crowd, and Sistah Iya Anyangō Yaa Asanewaa, founder of The FLYY Movement, led a call-and-response movement procession and closing session.

Dr. Kyra Dorsey, a Collective member representing the Farmington Valley Chapter of The Links, Incorporated, moderated a panel with OB-GYN and menopause specialist Dr. Lenora S. Williams (UConn Women's Health); women's health advocate and life-transition specialist Dr. Nathalie Bonafé; naturopathic physician Dr. Ginger Nash; trauma-informed clinical social worker Ava M.



Hart; and inclusive beauty and skincare expert Evelyn Manson-Miller. Representative Belton emphasized the importance of provider education, workplace protections, insurance coverage, and public awareness.

The event also showed how a community priority can engage an entire academic health center. Trisha Pitter, HDI's Health Equity Learning Strategist/Instructional Designer and MEI Program Director, emphasized the importance of encouraging open conversations about menopause. HDI Associate Director Dr. Linda Barry reflected on how the gathering helped people feel valued, heard, and seen. Dr. Linda Sprague Martinez, director of HDI, situated the celebration within community-driven public health action, while UConn School of Medicine Dean Dr. Bruce T. Liang emphasized cardiovascular health, care coordination, provider relationships, and the importance of a responsive health system.

We Spread the Word

The initiative expanded these conversations to the public. Dr. Sprague Martinez and Pitter discussed menopause equity on Hot 93.7 FM and FOX61, while Dr. Monika Doshi, Assistant Professor of HDI, and Dr. Dors-ey addressed knowledge gaps, racial disparities, and stigma on WFSB. These appearances helped normalize open discussion and reached new audiences.



Widening the Circle

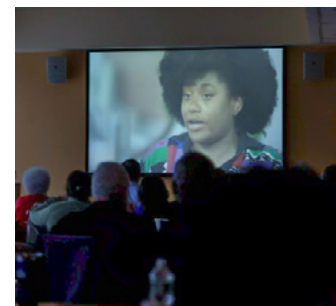
The work continued into 2026 with a community screening of *The M Factor 2: Before the Pause*, co-hosted with YWCA Hartford Region. The event included expert discussion from Dr. Williams and Dr. Barry, providing attendees with direct access to clinicians knowledgeable about perimenopause.



That spring, education led to institutional engagement and policy action. HDI staff, MEC members, and community partners testified before the Connecticut General Assembly in support of workplace accommodation and a medical provider toolkit. Testifiers included Dr. Sprague Martinez, Pitter, HDI Graduate Fellow Malia Hunt, and MEC member Monika Shoham, who shared her lived experience. Representative Kai Belton served as a key legislative champion and partner.

At the *Because of UConn Conversation Series: Shredding the Silence on Menopause*, alums, clinicians, donors, faculty, staff, students, and community members gathered for another screening and dialogue. Certified nurse-midwife and maternal health equity scholar Dr. Lucinda Canty guided a panel with UConn Health's board-certified orthopedic surgeon Dr. Katherine J. Coyner, Dr. Rae-Gunn Samson, and Dr. Williams, connecting menopause to reproductive justice, racial equity, musculoskeletal health, mobility, community-based care, and patient advocacy. UConn Foundation leader Marinda Reynolds, Vice President for Inclusion and Civil Rights Dr. Jeffrey Hines, and Interim Assistant Vice President for Diversity and Inclusion Kathleen Holgerson underscored the value of cross-institutional collaboration and the demand for continued education.

Men of Pause extended the work to a group too often left out of the conversation. More than 60 people attended the community-planned gathering at Community Health Center in Middletown. Sana Latrease Cotten, founder of Unashamed, Inc. and MEC member, and Armando Jimenez, founder of The Tailored Compass, co-led the planning, with Jimenez facilitating a program built around what he called "authentic intentionality." Dr. Rae-Gunn Samson, UConn Health endocrinologist Dr. Brendan Dillon, and clinical social worker Safiya Rudock addressed menopause, andropause, mood, sleep, energy, intimacy, and communication, including the difference between trying to fix a problem and listening with empathy. Pitter, Hunt, and Dr. Sprague Martinez reflected afterward on what participants' questions revealed: informed support can strengthen relationships, families, faith communities, and future generations.



Oral Health and Menopause moved the conversation into territory frequently missing from menopause care altogether. Roughly 60 providers, researchers, students, and community partners joined in person and online. Dr. Steven M. Lepowsky, dean of the UConn School of Dental Medicine, and Dr. Sprague Martinez opened the program, followed by partner remarks from dentist Dr. Bethaney Brenner on behalf of Delta Dental. Clinical speakers Dr. Seema Kurup and Dr. Jenna Ward of the School of Dental Medicine, Dr. Williams, and Dr. Liu examined the oral microbiome, burning mouth syndrome,



dry mouth, bone health, and related mental health and structural disparities. HDI Health Equity Fellow Sophie Tulchinsky moderated the closing panel, and a special Delta Dental edition of The (M) Factor featured Sarah Chavarria, president and CEO of Delta Dental of California and Affiliates, and Dr. Teri Barichello, vice president and chief dental officer of Delta Dental of Oregon and Alaska. The point was straightforward: the mouth is not separate from the body, and menopause care cannot stay confined to one specialty.



The Numbers Prove it

Across nine major events and additional community-led screenings, more than 600 people participated. The impact went beyond attendance. At Power of the Pause, 95 percent of survey respondents felt more comfortable discussing menopause, and 90 percent felt better prepared to advocate for themselves or others. Participants consistently requested providers who listen, clearer information on treatment options, improved insurance coverage, workplace support, and research addressing racial disparities.

None of this happened alone. These partners each contributed relationships, expertise, space, or institutional reach:

- The Commission on Women, Children, Seniors, Equity and Opportunity
- The Farmington Valley Chapter of The Links, Incorporated
- The Aurora Women and Girls Foundation
- UConn's Institute for Collaboration on Health, Intervention, and Policy

- The UConn Center on Aging
- Community Health Center
- YWCA Hartford Region
- The UConn Foundation
- The UConn Office for Inclusion and Civil Rights
- The UConn School of Dental Medicine
- The Connecticut Oral Health Initiative
- The Mandell JCC of Greater Hartford

Community-based organizations contributed trust, cultural knowledge, and leadership. Clinicians and faculty provided interdisciplinary expertise. Students and fellows supported research and engagement. Institutional partners connected the initiative to alumni, policymakers, and health professionals.

Partners and funders transformed community ideas into accessible learning experiences and practical resources:

- The Cigna Group
- Delta Dental
- AARP Connecticut
- UConn Health's Department of Public Health Sciences
- UConn Health's Department of Psychiatry
- The Aurora Women and Girls Foundation
- The Acupuncture Studio / Donna Faulkner Acupuncture LLC

From Advocacy to Law

As recurring concerns emerged, HDI and MEC members recognized that education alone could not address structural gaps. During Connecticut's 2026 legislative session, they worked with legislators, advocates, state agencies, and partners to advance shared priorities. HDI contributed community findings, a national policy scan and analysis, testimony, policy conversations, legislative consultation, and a testimonial advocacy guide. MEC members and residents shared their experiences in public records. This progress reflected the effort of an entire community movement.

As a result, two proposed bills supported by the initiative became law. House Bill 5389 was enacted as Section 18 of Public Act 26-13, directing the state to develop a provider toolkit for the diagnosis and treat-



ment of menopause, perimenopause, and postmenopause. The toolkit will include evidence-based guidance for clinicians across disciplines, information on hormonal and nonhormonal treatments, and best practices for culturally responsive care. Senate Bill 353 became Sections 30 and 31 of Public Act 26-12, clarifying that menopausal symptoms can qualify for workplace accommodations under Connecticut law.

Building What Comes Next

The provider toolkit requirement assigns HDI a clear role in advancing this work. State law directs HDI to develop the toolkit with input from the Connecticut Department of Public Health, individuals with lived experience, and health care providers, and to distribute it by June 1, 2028. The toolkit will translate community priorities into

practical, evidence-based support for screening, assessment, communication, treatment, referral, and follow-up. Community reviewers will ensure equity, relevance, and accessibility, while clinical experts confirm accuracy and feasibility. This approach continues the initiative's commitment to listening and expertise in clinical practice.

HDI is also creating a community learning and screening toolkit to support libraries, faith communities, workplaces, health centers, and local organizations to host their own menopause educational events. Planned resources include facilitator guides, participant handouts, discussion activities, self-advocacy tools, and connections to trusted providers and experts. Both toolkits are in development. Sustainable change occurs when communities have the tools to lead.

The Vision Ahead

The Menopause Equity Initiative demonstrates public health leadership by listening, sharing power, and integrating community knowledge with education, research, clinical practice, communications, and policy. Success is measured not only by attendance or legislation, but by the increasing number of people ready to speak, learn, advocate, and act. The vision is for individuals to understand their bodies and choices, families to respond with empathy, workplaces to protect dignity, communities to share trusted knowledge, and health systems to provide respectful, informed, and culturally responsive care as the standard.



Linguistic Inclusion & Language Justice

HDI continues to deepen its commitment to linguistic inclusion and language justice through two major initiatives, **Voces Unidas Para Salud** and the **PA'LANTE Latina Health Agenda**. Together, these efforts are designed to transform how Connecticut's health systems engage Spanish speaking patients and respond to the priorities of Latina women. They reflect HDI's belief that language is not a barrier to overcome, but a right that must be honored in both health care, research, and policy.

These initiatives directly advance HDI's statutory charge under Connecticut General Statutes §10a-109b, which calls on the Institute to enhance research and the delivery of care to minoritized and medically underserved populations across the state. By centering Spanish speaking patients and Latina women, HDI fulfills this mandate through culturally grounded research, community driven inquiry, and systems level strategies that promote more equitable access, participation, and care.

Voces Unidas Para Salud: Centering Spanish Speakers in Health Care

This year, HDI advanced its linguistic inclusion work through **Voces Unidas Para Salud**, a community driven initiative designed to strengthen communication, trust, and accessibility for Spanish speaking patients across Connecticut. The initiative brings together patients, frontline staff, and health system leaders to co design solutions grounded in lived experience.

HDI began this work by conducting a series of focus groups with Spanish speaking patients in Hartford. Participants shared detailed accounts of communication barriers, interpreter challenges, and instances in which language exclusion compromised their care. These insights became the foundation for a daylong participatory planning session with patients, front desk staff, administrators, and interpreters from five health care sites. Together, participants reflected on the focus group findings and generated practical, culturally responsive strategies to improve communication and the patient experience.

July 22, 2026 | Valen R. Diaz, MPH, MCHES

Patient Action Leaders Advancing Novel, Transformative, Equitable (PA'LANTE) Healthcare

UConn Health Disparities Institute and Hispanic Health Council amplifying Latina voices to improve healthcare in Connecticut.



public PBS NPR

WHPR The Colin McEnroe Show

NEXT UP: 1:00

Latinas in Hartford want better healthcare experiences. This is what they say they need.

Connecticut Public Radio | By Daniela Doncel
Published July 27, 2026 at 6:00 AM EDT



▶ LISTEN • 1:27



To ensure these strategies were feasible and scalable, HDI convened providers from across systems to review, refine, and assess the proposed solutions. Providers evaluated each idea for feasibility, acceptability, and potential impact, helping identify interventions that could be implemented across diverse clinical settings.

This multi stage, community engaged process ensures that the interventions developed through Voces Unidas Para Salud are grounded in the expertise of those closest to the issue, patients and frontline staff, while also being informed by the operational realities of health care delivery.

Looking ahead to FY27, HDI will translate these insights into action by developing and piloting trainings and systems level interventions that strengthen linguistic inclusion across Connecticut's health care landscape. These efforts will support health systems in honoring language as a core component of quality care and will advance HDI's mission to improve care delivery for medically underserved populations.

PA'LANTE: A Latina Health Agenda Led by Community Power

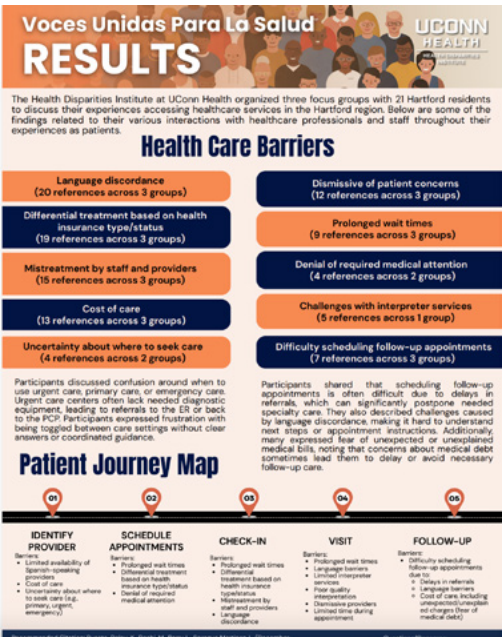
HDI's partnership with the Hispanic Health Council (HHC) through the **Patient Action Leaders Advancing Novel, Transformative, Equitable (PA'LANTE)** healthcare initiative marked a major milestone in community driven research and policy translation. With support from Patient-Centered Outcomes Research Institute® (PCORI®), HDI and HHC convened a team of Latina community researchers from Hartford to identify patient centered comparative effectiveness research



(CER) priorities that reflect the lived experiences of Latina women.

The PA'LANTE team conducted a bilingual community assessment with 118 Latinas, generating critical insights about communication, respect, shared decision making, mental health, and language access. While many women reported feeling listened to, far fewer felt that their opinions were actively sought in care decisions. Participants consistently identified five essential elements of equitable care: being listened to, treated with respect, included in decisions, spoken to in their language, and given clear information and adequate time.

These findings were shared at a bilingual community forum that brought together Latina women, researchers, clinicians, and community leaders. Participants highlighted barriers, including limited interpreter access, insufficient Spanish language information, and challenges navigating technology in health care



SAVE THE DATE!

PA'LANTE

PA'LANTE Community Forum

*Amplifying Latina Voices
to Improve Healthcare in Connecticut*

Join us for the PA'LANTE Community Forum, where community members, healthcare professionals, researchers, and students will come together to discuss healthcare barriers affecting Latina women in Connecticut and help shape future healthcare research priorities.

During this forum, PA'LANTE members will share key findings from their research and engage attendees in a collaborative discussion about what these findings mean for our community and how they can inform future research priorities and agendas.

REGISTER EARLY!
Attend the event and receive a gift card.

CHILD-CARE PROVIDED!

FOOD PROVIDED!

FREE EVENT • OPEN TO ALL COMMUNITY MEMBERS • YOUR VOICE MATTERS!

Hispanic Health Council

*Your voice. Our community.
Better health for all.*

UConn Health
HEALTH DISPARITIES INSTITUTE

DATE:
July 16, 2026

TIME:
4:30pm to 6:00pm

LOCATION:
Hartford Public Library
@ The Lyric
603 Park Street,
Hartford, CT 06106

SCAN QR CODE TO REGISTER
or visit:
<https://forms.cloud.microsoft/r/rSPx9HdeNK>

settings. They also emphasized the need for stronger mental health support, diabetes care, and greater accountability from health systems.

PA'LANTE is building a Latina Health Research Priorities and Interests rooted in lived experience and community power. As Dr. Sprague Martinez noted at the forum, when Latina women set the agenda, "we move beyond documenting disparities; we build the evidence needed to transform systems so they finally respond to the people they are meant to serve." The PA'LANTE team's findings will inform patient centered CER priorities and interests for Latina health in Connecticut and guide future policy recommendations.

Disclaimer: The statements presented in this publication are solely the responsibility of the author(s) and do not necessarily represent the views of PCORI®.

Acknowledgment: This project was funded through a Patient-Centered Outcomes Research Institute®

(PCORI®) Eugene Washington PCORI® Engagement Award (EACB-38982).

Transforming Systems Through Language Justice

Across both initiatives, HDI's work this year underscores a central truth: linguistic inclusion is foundational to health equity. By elevating the experiences of Spanish speaking patients' and centering Latina voices in research and policy, HDI is advancing its statutory charge to enhance research and improve the delivery of care for minority and medically underserved populations in Connecticut.

These efforts represent more than programmatic accomplishments; they are steps toward justice. They demonstrate what is possible when communities lead, when language is honored, and when research and policy are shaped by those most impacted by inequities.

Fiscal Year 2025–2026 Grant & Contract Activity

Between July 1, 2025 and June 30, 2026, the HDI team maintained a strong and steady pace of grant and contract development across our core faculty. Collectively, 17 proposals were submitted by HDI core faculty, reflecting a robust portfolio of community-engaged research, evaluation, and equity-focused initiatives. These submissions represented a combined \$10.77 million in requested funding, with HDI serving as lead on 10 of the proposals. During this period, HDI secured four new awards, totaling \$676,000, advancing work in maternal health, community-engaged research, and health equity advocacy. Of the submissions made during the fiscal year,

six remained under review, representing \$7.78 million in potential future funding. In addition, HDI managed seven active awards with a combined value of \$1.89 million, underscoring the Institute's continued success in sustaining multi-year projects and partnerships that strengthen Connecticut's health equity infrastructure. This level of activity highlights HDI's growing influence as a trusted partner in applied health equity research, evaluation, and community-centered innovation, and reflects the team's commitment to securing resources that advance equity-driven systems change.

HDI Faculty Spotlight

Dr. Monika Doshi

Dr. Monika Doshi completed her first year at the Health Disparities Institute, marking a period of exceptional productivity, recognition, and growth. In just twelve months, she secured two newly funded studies, expanded HDI's statewide partnerships, and elevated HDI's visibility through national and regional invited talks and presentations.

Dr. Doshi's newly funded projects include:

Project 1: Access Health CT Leaver Survey

The Access Health CT Leaver Survey is a statewide study designed to better understand why customers did not renew Qualified Health Plan or HUSKY Health coverage for 2026. The project focuses on customers who have lost coverage, with the goal of identifying the factors that shape coverage decisions and contribute to insurance gaps, particularly the role of social determinants of health in shaping those decisions. By centering the experiences of non-renewing customers, the study will provide insight into the barriers Connecticut residents may face when trying to maintain continuous health coverage.

Findings from this statewide study are intended to help Access Health CT and its partners develop more equity-focused outreach, strengthen affordability strategies, improve enrollment and renewal supports, and design retention efforts that better respond to the needs of Connecticut residents at risk of losing coverage.



Project 2: Connecticut Urban Opportunity Collective's Changemaker Fund

The evaluation of the Connecticut Urban Opportunity Collective's Changemaker Fund is a multi-regional study of a Direct Cash Pilot Program designed to support social and economic mobility in Connecticut. The project focuses on understanding the effects of direct cash on social determinants of health and participants' well-being. The evaluation study will explore how the initiative contributes to community involvement, building community voice and power across participating regions.

Findings from this multi-regional evaluation study are intended to document the effects of direct cash support, deepen understanding of how such programs can advance social and economic mobility, and inform future community-centered strategies that respond to the priorities and lived experiences of Connecticut residents.

Dr. Doshi's Other Projects:

Dr. Doshi serves as an investigator on Voces Unidas Para Salud and the CREPH dissemination grant, strengthening HDI's research infrastructure and expanding its statewide impact. She has also contributed substantively to the development and writing of multiple team grants and contracts.

National and Regional Invited Talks and Presentations:

National invited talk. In addition to her funded research, Dr. Doshi has been invited to share her scholarship with national audiences, reflecting the growing visibility of her work and its relevance to urgent public health, immigrant health, and human rights concerns. Her national profile is demonstrated by her recent invited

talk for the Women in Science and Medicine - Medical Scientist Training Program Annual Meeting at the University of Minnesota. This invitation underscored the significance of her research on the health impacts of immigration enforcement and the broader implications of this work for health equity, structural determinants of health, and justice-centered public health practice.

Dr. Doshi also served as a panelist for the University of Massachusetts Chan School of Medicine's Pathways session on Structural Inequities, Advocacy, and Justice, an interactive discussion for medical school students exploring leadership in health care. The conversation offered students practical guidance on developing as health care leaders, including the traits, experiences, and lessons that can support advocacy, equity, and justice-oriented practice.

Regional talks and presentations. Regionally, Dr. Doshi has contributed to public health conversations across Connecticut through invited presentations, academic seminars, and community-facing panels. At the Connecticut Public Health Association Annual Meeting, she joined UConn faculty and students in championing equity, community voice, and justice-centered public health practice. Her oral presentation and contributions were highlighted in UConn Today, which recognized her role in advancing community-engaged approaches to public health research, policy, and practice.

Dr. Doshi has also served as a panelist for the AHEC Scholars Program Urban Service Track session, Enhancing Resource Navigation and Quality of Care for Patients of Diverse National Origins, where she contributed expertise related to immigrant communities, care navigation, and culturally responsive public health practice. In addition, she presented her immigration-related research at the UConn School of Medicine Department of Public Health Sciences monthly seminar, as well as at the HDI Speaker series, further engaging regional audiences in discussions of immigration enforcement, health inequities, and public health policy.

She also participated as a panelist for the Connecticut Commission on Women, Children, Seniors, Equity and Opportunity's event, Commemorating America 250 and Exploring the American Dream. Through this engagement, Dr. Doshi connected her scholarship to broader public conversation about belonging, opportunity, equity, and the meaning of the American Dream in contemporary Connecticut communities.

Advising and Mentorship

Dr. Doshi currently serves on two Capstone committees for MPH students in the Department of Public Health Sciences. Since joining HDI, Dr. Doshi continues to mentor and closely work with a doctoral student from UConn School of Social Work.

Overall, Dr. Doshi's first year reflects a powerful combination of scholarly excellence, community partnership, and policy relevant research. Her leadership continues to shape HDI's mission to advance health equity across Connecticut.

Dr. Linda Barry

Dr. Linda Barry continues to be a powerful statewide and national voice for equity in medicine, health justice, and community centered leadership. As Associate Director of HDI, she plays a critical role in shaping the Institute's strategic direction, strengthening statewide partnerships, and advancing initiatives that center the experiences of communities most impacted by inequities. This year, her work reached new audiences, expanded HDI's pipeline development efforts, and deepened the Institute's impact across Connecticut.



Dr. Barry delivered an inspiring keynote address at the Black Men in White Coats Youth Summit, a national initiative dedicated to encouraging underrepresented youth to pursue careers in medicine. Her keynote emphasized representation, mentorship, and dismantling structural barriers that limit pathways into health professions. Her message resonated deeply with students, families, and educators, reinforcing her role as a leading advocate for diversifying the health workforce.

Dr. Barry helped lead a statewide conversation on artificial intelligence, health equity, and racial justice, bringing together policymakers, technologists, clinicians, and community leaders. Her leadership ensured that communities of color were centered in discussions about AI's role in health care, particularly around bias, access, and accountability. The forum highlighted her ability to bridge innovation with equity.

and to push systems toward responsible, community aligned adoption of emerging technologies.

This year, Dr. Barry received a grant from the Fairfield County's Community Foundation to support the Black Maternal Health Initiative, coalition work focused on Black maternal health, strengthening community partnerships and advancing policy relevant research aimed at improving outcomes for Black birthing people.

Dr. Barry was appointed chair of the Data, Evaluation and Quality Subcommittee of the Connecticut Maternal Health Task Force, which is charged with developing the legislatively mandated Maternity Care Report Card. She also serves as a member of the Connecticut Infant Mortality Review Committee, where she contributes clinical expertise and an equity centered perspective to statewide efforts to prevent maternal and infant deaths. The committee reviews infant deaths to identify disparities and improve care. Her leadership helps ensure that Connecticut's maternal and infant health policies and accountability measures, reflect the lived experiences of CT birthing people, particularly of Black women and families.

In FY26, Dr. Barry launched the inaugural Health Equity Advocacy Research (HEAR) Fellowship Program, funded by Greater Hartford Gives. This fellowship expands HDI's educational programs by providing structured mentorship, leadership training, hands on research and advocacy experience for students committed to advancing health equity. The HEAR Fellowship reflects Dr. Barry's long standing commitment to cultivating diverse leaders and expanding opportunities for underrepresented students across Connecticut. She presented about the fellowship model at the 2026 Connecticut Public Health Association Annual Meeting.

Across her roles, Dr. Barry continues to model what it means to lead with integrity, community accountability, and a deep commitment to justice. Her election to the Alpha Omega Alpha Honor Medical Society and selection as a 2026 Women of Innovation® Finalist in the Academic Post-Secondary Innovation and Leadership Category underscore her excellence in teaching and mentorship, as well as her enduring contributions to leadership, scholarship, and service. Together, these honors reflect the impact of her work to strengthen HDI's statewide reach, expand opportunities for underrepresented youth, and advance policy-

relevant research that improves health outcomes for marginalized communities.

Dr. Emil Coman

Dr. Emil Coman strengthens HDI's analytic and methodological capacity through innovative teaching, new funded research collaborations, and impactful scholarly contributions across Connecticut and the region.



Over the past year, he secured new grant funding that expands HDI's footprint in applied health disparities research, including projects evaluating the return on investment of Connecticut's Health Information Exchange, examining headache treatment among women and veterans, and advancing family medicine training through the LEADS initiative funded by the American Board of Family Medicine. He also continues to contribute to aging research through ongoing collaborations with the Center on Aging.

Dr. Coman developed two new graduate seminars, Applied Structural Equation Modeling and Geospatial Health: Causal Analytical Methods that introduce cutting edge analytic approaches to students across UConn campuses. These courses reflect his commitment to training the next generation of public health researchers in rigorous, equity centered methods. He also supports medical students through the School of Medicine's Scholarship and Discovery program, guiding them in developing high quality research projects.

This year, Dr. Coman delivered multiple invited talks and presentations that highlight his expertise in causal inference, geospatial analysis, and advanced statistical methods. His work was featured at venues including the American Public Health Association Annual Meeting, the Connecticut Public Health Association Conference, and the Modern Modeling Methods Conference at Fordham University. He also delivered a keynote address at George Emil Palade University on modern causal methods and presented on geospatial determinants of health through the HDI Speaker Series.

Through his teaching, funded research, and scholarly engagement, Dr. Coman continues to elevate HDI's

methodological excellence and contribute meaningfully to the Institute's mission to advance health equity through rigorous, community responsive research.

Dr. Rocio Chang

During the 2025–2026 academic year, Dr. Rocio Chang continued to shine as a dynamic HDI faculty leader whose work bridges trauma science, culturally responsive care, and community engagement. Her contributions across teaching, research, and national leadership

strengthened HDI's mission to advance health equity and improve care for communities most affected by trauma and structural inequities.

Transformative Trauma Informed Education

Dr. Chang's teaching reached learners across disciplines and geographies. At UConn Health, she served as Course Director and Instructor for the Medical Spanish elective, providing 62 hours of individualized instruction to medical students and expanding linguistic access in clinical training. She also supported the Latino Medical Student Association as Co Chair, helping students deepen connections with Latinx communities in Greater Hartford.

Her trauma informed training extended nationally and internationally. She taught the TARGET model to doctoral psychology students at Carlos Albizu University, trained psychiatry residents at UConn Health, and delivered radical healing instruction to clinicians in Colorado. She also provided trauma responsive training to 97 correctional officers in Puerto Rico, demonstrating her commitment to improving care in high need systems.

Robust Grant Portfolio

Dr. Chang's research contributions remained substantial. She served as Principal Investigator for the SAMHSA funded Center for Trauma Recovery and Juvenile Justice and contributed as Co Investigator on multiple NIH and

SAMHSA grants focused on developmental trauma, racialized stress, perinatal stress, Latino family emotion socialization, and health equity advocacy.

Her interdisciplinary approach, spanning neuroscience, developmental psychology, and community based trauma research, continues to elevate HDI's scientific impact.

Leadership and Community Engagement

Dr. Chang holds several influential national roles, including Board Member of the American Professional Society on the Abuse of Children and Co Chair of the Latino Family and Children Collaborative Group within the National Child Traumatic Stress Network. She also serves as a Trauma Expert Panelist for the Hispanic/Latino Behavioral Health Center of Excellence.

Locally, she maintains long standing involvement with GOODWorks, Inc., supporting therapeutic programming for women transitioning from incarceration, and contributes to institutional equity efforts as a Diversity Champion at UConn Health.

Knowledge Dissemination and Public Scholarship

Between 2025 and 2026, Dr. Chang delivered numerous invited and peer reviewed presentations, including academic talks in Puerto Rico, New Orleans, New York, Baltimore, and Connecticut. Her presentations addressed racial trauma, secondary traumatic stress, developmental trauma, resilience, and culturally grounded intervention strategies. She also shared early findings from her Spanish language adaptation of Neuroflex, advancing culturally responsive neuroscience research.

For the coming year, Dr. Chang plans to finalize three levels of Medical Spanish curriculum, select a Dental Spanish curriculum, and complete a clinician focused curriculum on dissociation, developmental trauma, and sexual abuse. She will continue advancing her research portfolio and pursue additional SAMHSA and PCORI funding.

Her accomplishments and her vision for the year ahead reflect the depth, energy, and commitment she brings to HDI, UConn Health, and the communities we serve.



Education & Training

HDI continues to invest in developing a diverse and justice centered pipeline of future health equity leaders. Through interdisciplinary training, applied research experiences, and community engaged learning, students gain the skills needed to advance equity across policy, practice, and research. This year, our students worked alongside HDI faculty and staff on projects that strengthened statewide initiatives, deepened community partnerships, and expanded the reach of our mission. Their contributions reflect the power of mentorship, collaboration, and culturally grounded education in shaping the next generation of public health and social work professionals.

Student & Fellow Contributions

Malia Hunt

MSW Candidate, UConn School of Social Work, Class of 2026

Preceptor: Ms. Trisha Pitter

Social Work Supervisor: Dr. Linda Sprague Martinez

As a Research and Program Fellow with HDI's Menopause Equity Initiative, Malia played a key role in co designing and implementing statewide community health education programs. She supported advocacy efforts to advance equitable menopause legislation and helped build community partnerships that center the experiences of women navigating menopause. With Ms. Pitter serving as her preceptor and Dr. Sprague Martinez as her social work supervisor, Malia's work reflects her deep commitment to eliminating health disparities through advocacy, education, and community engagement.



Deborah Kyerematen

Master of Public Health, UConn Program in Applied Public Health Sciences, Class of 2026

Project: Advancing Health Equity in Public Policy: A Comparative Study and Toolkit for Racial/Health Equity Impact Assessments in Connecticut

Preceptor & Mentor: Dr. Linda Sprague Martinez

Deborah's project focused on strengthening the use of racial and health equity impact assessments in Connecticut's policy landscape. Through comparative analysis and toolkit development, she examined how structured assessments can help legislators and agencies evaluate the equity implications of proposed policies. Under the mentorship of Dr. Sprague Martinez, Deborah's work contributes to HDI's broader efforts to embed equity into policymaking processes and support more just outcomes for communities across the state.



Kelly Sanchez

Doctoral Student, UConn School of Social Work

Preceptor & Mentor: Dr. Monika Doshi

Kelly collaborated with HDI on several initiatives aimed at advancing health equity through research and policy analysis. Her



work included efforts to promote linguistic inclusion in health care, with a focus on improving communication and accessibility for diverse patient populations. She also contributed to a project assessing health care access through the ACA Marketplace and Medicaid, analyzing how recent policy changes affect underserved communities. Under the guidance of Dr. Doshi, Kelly's interdisciplinary approach supports HDI's mission to inform more equitable health systems and improve outcomes for historically marginalized populations.

Olasubomi Ayomini Ajayi, HEAR Fellowship

Health Equity Advocacy & Research (HEAR) Program

Program Director: Dr. Linda Barry

Faculty Mentor: Dr. Kristen Cooksey Stowers

This year, HDI also collaborated with a HEAR Fellow under the mentorship of Dr. Barry. The



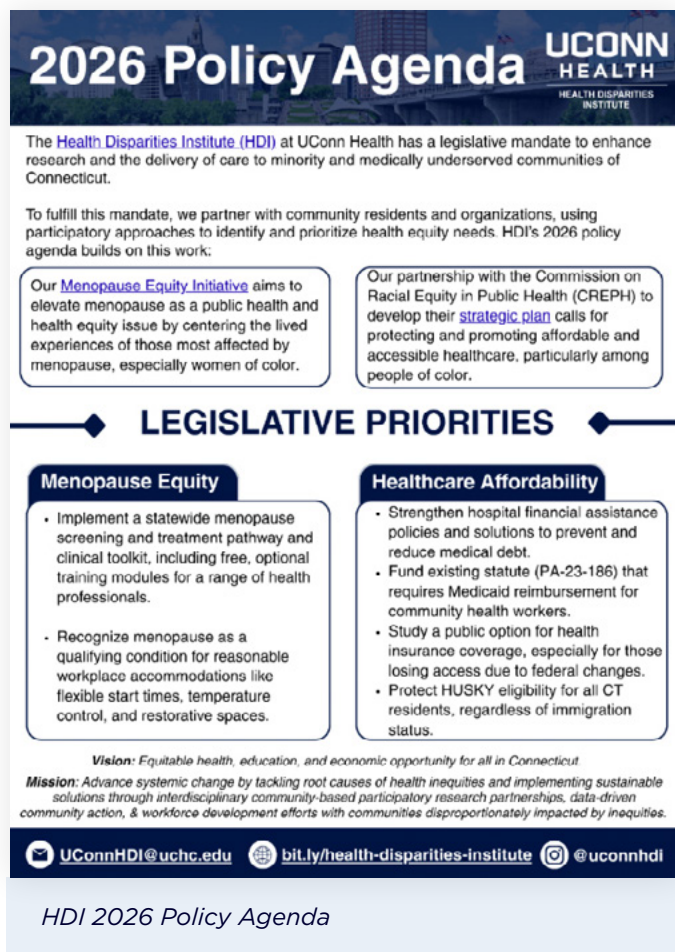
Health Equity Advocacy & Research (HEAR) Program, offered through UConn's Office of Multicultural and Community Affairs, prepares students to become leaders in health equity through hands-on research, community engagement, and professional development. HEAR Fellows work alongside faculty to address pressing health disparities and contribute to projects that advance justice-centered research and advocacy. The HEAR Program strengthens HDI's commitment to developing a pathway for future health equity scholars and practitioners.

The dedication and creativity of our students and fellows continue to strengthen HDI's work and expand our impact across Connecticut. Their contributions reflect the promise of a new generation of leaders committed to advancing justice, equity, and community centered research. By investing in mentorship, applied learning, and interdisciplinary collaboration, HDI is helping shape a workforce prepared to transform systems and champion health equity in every sector. We are proud of their accomplishments and grateful for the energy, insight, and commitment they bring to our shared mission.



2026 Legislative Session Report

This report provides a detailed overview 2026 legislative session policy agenda, activities, policy advocacy and outcomes, and accomplishments of the UConn Health Disparities Institute (HDI). This was a short session—the shortest in CT history—from February to May 2026.



2026 Policy Agenda UCONN HEALTH HEALTH DISPARITIES INSTITUTE

The [Health Disparities Institute \(HDI\)](#) at UConn Health has a legislative mandate to enhance research and the delivery of care to minority and medically underserved communities of Connecticut.

To fulfill this mandate, we partner with community residents and organizations, using participatory approaches to identify and prioritize health equity needs. HDI's 2026 policy agenda builds on this work:

Our [Menopause Equity Initiative](#) aims to elevate menopause as a public health and health equity issue by centering the lived experiences of those most affected by menopause, especially women of color.

Our partnership with the Commission on Racial Equity in Public Health (CREPH) to develop their [strategic plan](#) calls for protecting and promoting affordable and accessible healthcare, particularly among people of color.

LEGISLATIVE PRIORITIES

Menopause Equity

- Implement a statewide menopause screening and treatment pathway and clinical toolkit, including free, optional training modules for a range of health professionals.
- Recognize menopause as a qualifying condition for reasonable workplace accommodations like flexible start times, temperature control, and restorative spaces.

Healthcare Affordability

- Strengthen hospital financial assistance policies and solutions to prevent and reduce medical debt.
- Fund existing statute (PA-23-186) that requires Medicaid reimbursement for community health workers.
- Study a public option for health insurance coverage, especially for those losing access due to federal changes.
- Protect HUSKY eligibility for all CT residents, regardless of immigration status.

Vision: Equitable health, education, and economic opportunity for all in Connecticut.

Mission: Advance systemic change by tackling root causes of health inequities and implementing sustainable solutions through interdisciplinary community-based participatory research partnerships, data-driven community action, & workforce development efforts with communities disproportionately impacted by inequities.

UConnHDI@uchc.edu | bit.ly/health-disparities-institute | @uconnhdi

HDI 2026 Policy Agenda

Policy Agenda

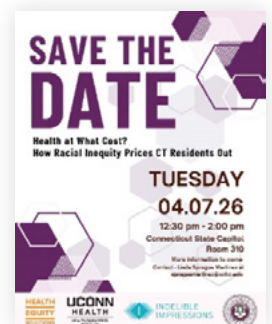
For the 2026 legislative session, HDI put forward two legislative priorities. They included:

- Menopause Equity
 - Implement a statewide menopause screening and treatment pathway and clinical toolkit, including free, optional training modules for a range of health professionals.
 - Recognize menopause as a qualifying condition for reasonable workplace accommodations like flexible start times, temperature control, and restorative spaces.
- Healthcare Affordability
 - Strengthen hospital financial assistance policies and solutions to prevent and reduce medical debt.
 - Fund existing statute (PA-23-186) that requires Medicaid reimbursement for community health workers.
 - Study a public option for health insurance coverage, especially for those losing access due to federal changes.
 - Protect HUSKY eligibility for all CT residents, regardless of immigration status.

Activities

HDI engaged in several activities this legislative session, outlined below.

HDI disseminated the strategic plan we developed for the





Roundtable panelists & facilitator.



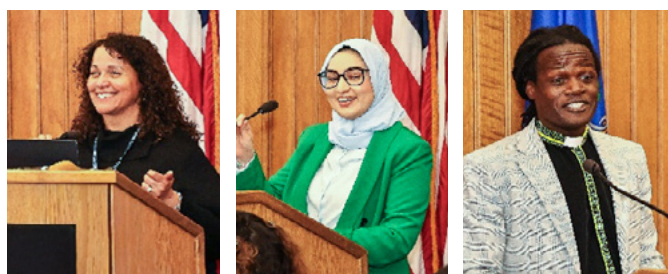
Panelists, Speakers, HDI, CREPH, and HES.

Commission on Racial Equity and Public Health (CREPH), mainly related to the healthcare affordability priority. HDI hosted a health leadership roundtable with CREPH, Health Equity Solutions, and Indelible Impressions, titled “Health at What Cost? How Racial Inequity Prices CT Residents Out.” HDI convened leaders from across the state discuss each of the priority areas featured in the CREPH strategic plan. Panelists included Ayesha Clarke, Executive Director of Health Equity Solutions, James Jeter, Co-Founder and Director of Full Citizens Coalition, Eva Bermúdez Zimmerman, Coalition Director of Child Care for CT Coalition, and Carline Charmelus, Operations and Equity Director of Partnership for Strong Communities. Yvonne Alston of Indelible Impressions facilitated the panel. The event was very well attended and received. It was recorded on CT-N and the recording can be found [here](#).

HDI led the **Menopause Equity Initiative** with the Menopause Equity Collective, focused on the menopause equity priority. There were several menopause equity events during legislative session. Representative Kai Belton, a close partner of HDI, hosted a Menopause Equity Roundtable Discussion. Both Dr. Linda Sprague Martinez, HDI Director, and Trisha Pitter, Health Equity Learning Strategist, served as panelists on the roundtable discussion. Also, the UConn Foundation hosted a screening of the M Factor film.



Menopause Equity Roundtable Flyer



Roundtable Speakers



Roundtable Audience

UConn Today

COMMUNITY IMPACT | UCONN HEALTH | UNIVERSITY NEWS

March 9, 2020 | Trisha Pitter, MS, Muffa Hunt, BSW & Linda Sprague Martinez, PhD, UConn Health Disparities Institute

UConn Health Disparities Institute Leads the Way: Making Moves for Menopause Equity

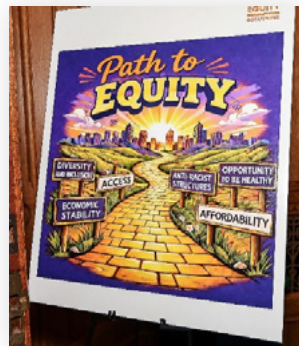
From the State Capitol to campus, the UConn Health Disparities Institute (HDI) is accelerating a statewide movement to make menopause visible in policy, practice, and everyday conversations.

UConn Today Story on Menopause Equity Work



HDI Team Members, Trisha Pitter, Health Equity Learning Strategist, Malia Hunt, Graduate Student Intern, and Dr. Linda Sprague Martinez, HDI Director, testifying in support of priority bills and interacting with legislators

HDI participated in **Health Equity Week** in April and issued a call to action to residents to advance health equity. Finally, HDI engaged in policy advocacy to further our legislative priorities.



Health Equity Week Theme

PHOTO CREDIT: REEF'S VIEWS

Outcomes

- Both bills passed.
- SB 353 was rolled into another bill about workplace accommodations.
- HB 5389 named HDI as the developers of the toolkit and provided funding to HDI for this effort.

HDI also conducted a policy landscape analysis of menopause equity policies and summarized the findings for distribution to legislators.

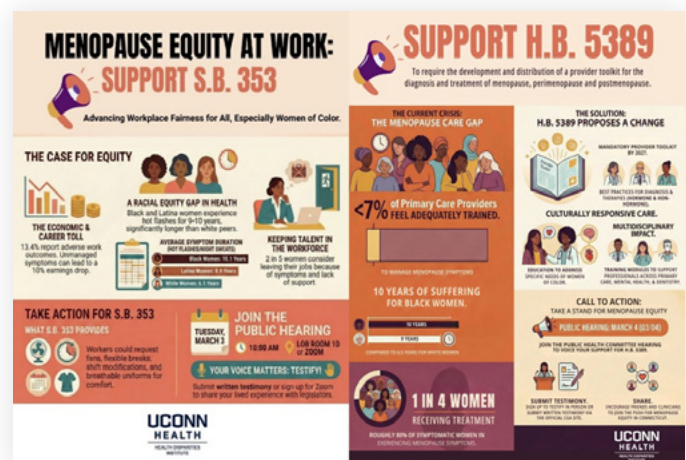
Policy Advocacy and Outcomes

Below are highlights of HDI's policy advocacy and the outcomes of that work.

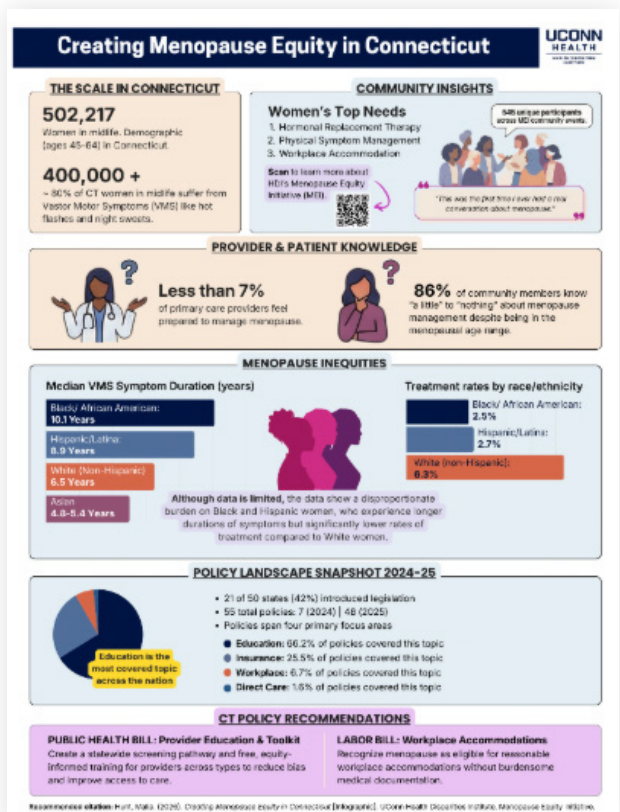
Menopause Equity

HDI gave written and spoken testimony on two menopause equity bills:

- In support of SB 353: AAC Reasonable Accommodations in the Workplace for Conditions Related to Menopause
- General comments on HB 5389: AAC A Provider Toolkit for The Diagnosis and Treatment of Menopause, Perimenopause, and Postmenopause



Call to action materials created by HD



Policy Landscape One-pager Created by HDI

Healthcare Affordability

HDI gave written and spoken testimony on three healthcare affordability bills:

- General comments on HB 5032: An Act Adjusting The State Budget For The Biennium Ending June 30, 2027
 - Fund Community Health Worker (CHW) Medicaid reimbursement
 - Preserve HUSKY for immigrants
 - Support Basic Health Program (BHP)
- In opposition to HB 5378: AAC Self-Funded Multiple Employer Welfare Arrangements and Requiring a Study of the Feasibility of Establishing the Connecticut Option Program and Multiple Employer Welfare Arrangements
- In support of SB 3: AAC Health Care Affordability
 - Also including SB 496: AAC Hospital Uncompensated Care and HB 5559: AAC A Basic Health Program

Outcomes:

- There were partial policy wins; some provisions passed, while some did not.



Press Conference Convened by Senator Matt Lesser with Healthcare Advocates on Healthcare Affordability

- HB 5032:
 - CHW Medicaid reimbursement funding did not pass. Despite this provision being signed into CT state law several years ago, CHW Medicaid reimbursement has yet to be funded and implemented.
 - HUSKY for Immigrants funding did pass and health insurance access for undocumented children up to age 16 was preserved.
- HB 5378 did not pass.
 - Multiple Employer Welfare Arrangements (MEWAs) are subpar insurance plans referred to as "junk insurance plans" that drive inequity. Therefore, HDI opposed this bill and this outcome is favorable. Although this bill did not pass in the 2026 session, advocates do anticipate it coming up in future sessions and it has come up in previous sessions.
- SB 3:
 - Minimal provisions passed and were rolled into another big bill, SB 1.
 - The hospital financial assistance measures mostly did not pass. Measures that passed include hospitals are required to notify patients about their financial assistance programs and presumptive eligibility based on SNAP and WIC enrollment. Additional measures to increase accessibility to financial assistance programs and hospital accountability measures did not pass.
 - A Basic Health Program (BHP) would provide affordable health insurance coverage options for



Ayesha Clarke, Executive Director of Health Equity Solutions, Speaks at Healthcare Affordability Press Conference

those at risk of or who have already lost coverage because of HR 1, such as legally present immigrants and low-income residents. The measure that passed is minimal. It allows the state to apply for a BHP through a provision in the Affordable Care Act, but only if the Covered Connecticut waiver (i.e., the state's no-cost health insurance program) is rejected or not approved by July 2027. However, the executive branch is confident that Covered Connecticut will be renewed. Therefore, the benefits of a BHP for healthcare affordability and accessibility will likely not be realized.

Connecticut governor signs immigration enforcement protection bill



Governor Lamont Sign Immigration Justice Bill Into Law

Immigration Justice

Immigration justice was another priority that emerged as an urgent and critical issue given the current climate around immigration enforcement. HDI gave written testimony on one immigration justice bill:

- In support of SB 91: AAC Enhancing The Investigative Authority of the Inspector General and Establishing Protected Areas

Outcomes:

- This bill passed.
- Provisions establishing protected areas from immigration enforcement, including hospitals, places of worship, schools, and courts, were rolled into SB 397: AAC Democracy and Government Accountability, among other immigration justice measures. The protected area provisions go into effect in October 2026.



HUSKY for Immigrants - Healthcare Provider Letter Delivery 2026

Visibility Event



HUSKY for Immigrants provider letter delivery to legislators

HDI also signed on to a healthcare provider letter for HUSKY for Immigrants that was in support of healthcare coverage for immigrant patients and named priority bills HDI supported, including SB 3 on healthcare affordability and SB 91 on protected areas.

Accomplishments

Over the 2026 legislative session, HDI had a series of accomplishments that advanced our policy agenda. HDI:

- Developed an HDI testimony template,
- Submitted six pieces of written testimony,
- Gave spoken testimony at three public hearings,
- Shared resources and a call to action for two priority bills on menopause equity through both our HDI and UConn Health channels,
- Wrote two UConn Today stories, and
- Signed on to one partner letter with HUSKY for Immigrants.

These accomplishments lay the groundwork for HDI's continued research translation and dissemination work and engagement in policy advocacy, advancing our charge to enhance research and the delivery of care to minority and medically underserved populations of the state.



UConn HEALTH

HEALTH DISPARITIES
INSTITUTE

UConn Health Disparities Institute

263 Farmington Ave.

Farmington, CT 06030

UconnHDI@uchc.edu

860-241-1168