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Political and Social Determinants of Health: New Mexico 2023 Legislative Session

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“health a political choice, and politics is a continuous struggle for power among competing interest”- Ilona Kickbusch

We all might despise the statement, "health is a political choice," but put it into the proper context of just a few recent public health crises that our New Mexico communities are experiencing; the Covid-19 pandemic, the opioid epidemic, and even gun violence. It is essential to understand that conditions in which people are born, grow, live, work, and age drive health and health inequities, but if these social determinants shape health, what shapes these social determinants?[2] The distribution of money, power, resources, and information, i.e., politics. A relevant political process that affects all of us that is currently taking place is the New Mexico State Legislative Session. Besides the legal discourse that determines the distribution of power, money, resources, and information, what takes place at the legislative session also impacts social and political determinants of health.

January 17th, 2023, marked the beginning of the first Session of the 56th Legislature.[4] New Mexico's constitution mandates lawmakers meet in Santa Fe for a "regular" legislative session starting the third Tuesday of the year.[5] Since 2023 is an odd-numbered year, they meet for 60 days - or what is sometimes called a "long session" or "full session," but on even-numbered years, lawmakers only meet for 30 days, what's often referred to as a "short session" or a "budget session." [5] There is an in-depth process in both the house and the senate for a bill to become law, which includes arguing the benefit of legislation in floor sessions and the passing through of relevant committees in committee meetings with a "do pass" recommendation before being sent up to the governor.[5] In both variants of the Legislative Session, lawmakers will try to pass a wide range of laws, but what limits them is time and their ability to find support amongst their colleagues.[5] This year, the last day to introduce legislation was February 16th, and the last day of the session will be March 18th.[4] In these legal proceedings, health matters intersect with other societal determinants outside the healthcare system, such as the environment, housing, education, and commerce.

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The Covid-19 pandemic, for example, exposed many pre-existing inequities in the American society, and it will take collaborative efforts across different sectors to tackle these multifaceted problems. Within the healthcare system, there has been a call by many to make healthcare more accessible or equitable and to focus on the 'social determinants of health (SDoH). Implementing culturally relevant, interactive, and community-engaged health approaches in an attempt to account for the conditions in which people are born, grow, live, work, and age.[2,3] These social determinants deserve the attention of policymakers, public health professionals, medical schools, and researchers.[2] These professionals and leaders are calling for an increase of training on social determinants and equipping healthcare providers with tools to screen for factors such as socioeconomic status, hunger, education, employment, physical environment, and social support.[2] All are believed to be necessary for a more equitable healthcare system.[2] The problem is that even when these factors are flagged by health professionals (doctors, social workers, nurses, community health workers, etc.), the means to provide and acquire assistance becomes political.

To view health through the lens of political determinants means observing how different power dynamics within institutions, processes, interests, and ideological positions on self- government, affect health within other political systems and cultures and at varying levels of governance.[1] Health is political because it deals with the distribution of community resources to educate new generations of physicians and health professionals along with ensuring their availability; secondly many health determinants depend on political action; and third, health is a critical dimension of human rights and citizenship.[1] Historically, the passing of federal legislation was the first effort made to combat major health issues and concerns, in areas such as vaccines, air quality, seatbelt safety, and smoking cessation; which addressing these cases affected policy within various industries and the producing better health outcomes by legislative choices made, by lawmakers, political appointees, and politicians, at the state and federal level. [2] On the other hand, it's also essential to observe that taking place within these same governing bodies, is a political struggle of competing interests. These key players are responsible for creating (or dismantling) the rules, laws, and regulations that affect our healthcare system and our population's health.[2] Regardless of their political affiliation, they have personal attributes and attitudes that shape their politics, legislative agenda, and actions. [2]

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Acknowledging the political determinants of health can open the door to meaningful dialogue around politics and health. Since the politicization of health can be felt at all levels of governance, from the local to the global—within governments and the private sector, and civil society organizations reflect that politics does not just take place in government through elite politicians; it permeates society. [2] It encompasses all processes of conflict, cooperation, and negotiation in making decisions about how resources should be owned, used, produced, and distributed. [2] That is why New Mexico Black / African American communities must be attentive to this year's legislative session's happenings and participate if possible.

P.S.- I will share the link to access the state legislature so individuals can observe the discussed legislation, categorized by chamber (house or senate), type, and number, with advanced search options. All sessions are streamed and recorded.

[New Mexico Legislature Home - New Mexico Legislature \(nmlegis.gov\)](https://www.nmlegis.gov/)

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