



ADVANCING PUBLIC HEALTH IN NORTH CAROLINA: SUCCESS STORIES FROM THE NCDHHS DIVISION OF PUBLIC HEALTH

Snapshot of Our Key Initiatives

Federal investments during the COVID-19 pandemic have significantly enhanced North Carolina's public health infrastructure. These investments have expanded health care access, improved disease surveillance, and fostered innovative health solutions. This strategic utilization of funds demonstrates a commitment to not only meet immediate health crises but also to strengthen the state's public health foundations for the future.

As the majority of these initiatives sunset, this brief highlights a snapshot of impact and lasting benefits of these initiatives.



Promoting Health Opportunity for All North Carolinians

The COVID-19 pandemic worsened existing social and economic health disparities.

The NCDHHS Division of Public Health leveraged time limited federal funds appropriated by Congress and awarded by the Center for Disease Control and Prevention to North Carolina and funds allocated directly to the state by Congress to address challenges that impact high-risk, underserved and rural North Carolinians.

KEY INITIATIVES INCLUDE:

- **Expanded access to overdose prevention programs to over 30,000 North Carolinians.** The program distributed naloxone for 15,259 reported overdose reversals, and referred 2,147 participants to 160 unique substance use treatment providers, including for infectious disease testing, employment resources, and housing.
- **Regional Infection Prevention Support Teams completed over 9,000 on-site visits to safeguard against disease spread in long-term care facilities.** Educated over 31,000 long-term care facility staff members and conducted 4,000 in-depth infection control assessments in long-term care settings across North Carolina significantly reducing preventable infections. These teams bolstered knowledge and practices, reducing the transmission of diseases like COVID-19 and ultimately decreasing morbidity and mortality.
- **Reached nearly 50,000 congregants through Faith Leaders for Life Training Program,** a free suicide prevention program for faith leaders and congregations. **The training was provided to nearly 100 faith leaders** who serve Black, Indigenous, and People of Color populations and rural communities across 37 counties.
- **Developed a public-private partnership with NC Counts to launch the Healthier Together Program, a community-based network to effectively engage communities and promote equity throughout the COVID-19 emergency response, and close disparities in vaccination rates.** With funding from the CDC, the Healthier Together Program provided grants to 48 Community-Based Organizations across North Carolina. Together, from winter of 2020 to spring of 2021, focused initiatives by partners across the state led to a near parity of COVID-19 vaccination rates among residents who identify as white, Black or African American, and Hispanic over 16 years of age.

- **Tailored a smoking cessation social and paid media campaign in English and Spanish that yielded 44.1 million impressions, 131,000 clicks, and 2,650 enrollments to QuitlineNC.** Collaborated with North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University (NC A&T), the largest HBCU in the nation, to advance a 100% tobacco-free policy. Engaged a Tribal Consultant who works to educate about the benefits of expanding tobacco-free policies among American Indian tribes in North Carolina.
- **Advanced Maternal Health and Safety for Incarcerated Women:** NCDHHS Division of Public Health partnered with UNC Collaborative for Maternal & Infant Health to operationalize best practices training for implementation of the “Dignity for Women who are Incarcerated Act” (SL 2021-143). Training included modules on infectious disease prevention, risk mitigation strategies, identification of urgent medical conditions, and the standardization of medical assessments to identify those at risk for challenges while pregnant, during, or after birth.
- **Expanded reach of NCCARE360, a platform that unites health care and human services organizations on a single technology application that helps providers connect their patients to non-medical community resources, such as meal delivery, housing aid, diaper banks, senior day programs, and more.** To date, 78% of all LHDs have enrolled across the state. Through grants awarded to 21 Community Based Organizations (CBO), grantees worked to address the needs of 2,842 individuals that were referred. This has resulted in onboarding more than 306 new partners across the Triangle and Triad regions.
- **Strengthened practices in Local Health Departments:** 63 NC counties participated in a focused program to reduce health disparities and advance health equity across the state. The program resulted in the implementation of 82 activities to advance health equity.
- **Integrated food security and other metrics into transportation planning, improving access to essential services for all, showcasing a model of cross-sector collaboration as evidenced by partnership with the NC Department of Transportation.**
- **Protected North Carolina’s children from lead and asbestos through Clean Classrooms for Carolina Kids.** This mandated initiative, in partnership with RTI International and the NC Department of Public Instruction, targets lead and asbestos hazards in public schools and childcare facilities. Achievements include sampling for lead in 496 schools and 1,493 childcare centers, completing 17 mitigations in schools and 40 in childcare facilities, directly benefiting over 100,000 children. This program is crucial for ensuring that these environments are free from hazards that have long-term health consequences.
- **Enhanced protection for agricultural workforce.** Direct engagement with farmworkers has improved epidemiological- and flu-related efforts. Additionally, focused initiatives in meat and poultry processing plants demonstrate a comprehensive, all-hands-on-deck approach to worker health and safety.

> To date, **496** schools & **1493** childcare facilities sampled for lead

> To date, **17** mitigations in schools and **40** mitigations in childcare facilities have been completed

> Over **100,000** NC kids attending these facilities impacted

> Expanded from “**Clean Water** for Carolina Kids” to “**Clean Classrooms** for Carolina Kids” in September 2023

> Program continues to help public schools, licensed childcare centers, and family childcare homes to **identify** and **eliminate exposure** to lead and asbestos hazards in building infrastructure

Partnership with RTI International and NC Department of Public Instruction



Strengthening the Public Health Workforce

The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the need for a well-funded, adequately staffed, and trained public health infrastructure to manage health crises and maintain community health. The 2021 Public Health Workforce Interest and Needs Survey underscored ongoing issues in North Carolina, revealing the urgent need for strengthened public health capabilities. Despite the workforce's dedication, public health has faced a significant reduction of at least 40,000 job positions nationally between 2008 and 2017, with staff retention remaining a significant challenge.

- **DPH collaborated with the North Carolina Institute for Public Health at UNC** to assess and build capacity within the Division of Public Health and the state's 86 local health departments. Using the Foundational Public Health Services framework, key needs in communications, performance management, administrative competencies, and policy development were identified. Strategies to enhance capacity included training, targeted recruitment, cross-jurisdictional collaboration, and mentorship initiatives.
- **Attracted Talent through the 'We are NC Public Health' Campaign.** To strengthen the workforce pipeline and attract candidates to apply for governmental public health jobs, DPH launched the "We are NC Public Health" campaign, showcasing the critical role of public health professionals. The campaign used media buys and LinkedIn toolkits to drive traffic to publichealthcareers.org, resulting in 90% of the website traffic attributed to the campaign. The second phase focused on hard-to-fill roles, leveraging various media platforms to inspire candidates to apply for governmental public health jobs.
- **Launched the nation's first Credentialed Public Health Nurse course** to enhance the qualifications and diversity of the public health nursing workforce in North Carolina. **As of March 2024, 526 graduates of this program gained basic knowledge, skills, and training for governmental public health nursing jobs in North Carolina.** Public health nurses across the state gained the training and capacity needed with these efforts.
- **Made pivotal investments in shaping the future of the Division of Public Health (DPH) workforce through Historically Black Colleges and Universities/Minority Serving Institutes (HBCU/MSI) Internship and a New Fellowship Program.** These pipeline programs recruited interested students in a number of fields including 18 jobs with the highest vacancy rates. Specifically, DPH launched a Fellowship Program via a collaboration with the UNC Institute for Public Health to provide recent graduates with experiential learning opportunities that qualified them for open state positions. In partnership, with the Office of Health Equity, DPH hosted 191 interns through the HBCU/MSI Internship to ignite interest in public health careers within state and local government. These programs play a pivotal role in attracting and cultivating the next generation of public health professionals.



Excellence in Public Health

NCDHHS DPH Achieves National Accreditation, a recognition that underscores its commitment to excellence and continuous improvement in public health services.

The Division of Public Health (DPH) achieved a significant milestone by receiving accreditation from the Public Health Accreditation Board, signifying that the DPH meets or exceeds rigorous national standards set for quality and performance in public health operations, programs, and services. It is a testament to the division's dedication to protecting and promoting the health of North Carolina's residents through evidence-based practices, community engagement, strong communications and strategic leadership in public health challenges. Achieving accreditation not only enhances the credibility and accountability of the DPH but also sets a benchmark for quality and effectiveness in the delivery of public health services across the state.

- **Launched regional workforce initiatives to strengthen local capacity and attract talent.** Notably, leadership education, workshops, and retreats covering a spectrum of topics such as budget and financial management, legal issues, management, and health director skill-building were conducted, fostering leadership development and knowledge exchange across multiple regions.

Efforts to bolster Environmental Health (EH) staff through a statewide project focusing on staffing patterns, salaries, and recruitment strategies led to improved retention and engagement of EH personnel. Collaboration with universities offering EH degrees intensified, yielding internship initiatives that successfully transitioned 50% of student interns into roles within Local Health Departments (LHDs).

Two regions launched communication campaigns to increase awareness of local public health services and their importance, as well as to encourage individuals to apply for job openings within LHDs.

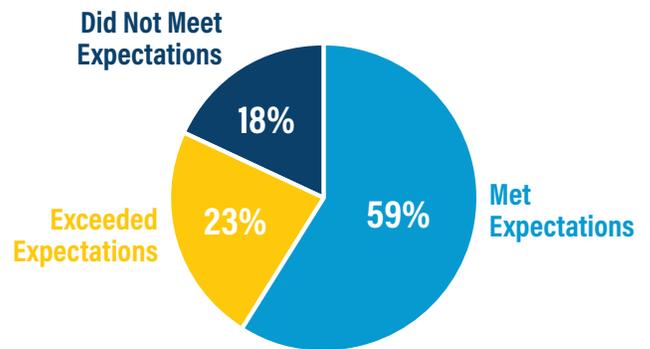
- Enhanced hiring from local communities to serve LHD needs through the **Carolina Community Tracing Collaborative (CCTC) network. Initially pivotal for contact tracing, CCTC’s expansion enhanced hiring from local communities for improved representation and effectiveness.** This established network, along with CCTC staff, now also supports other health initiatives, offering crucial assistance to LHDs.



Enhanced Two-Way Communication with the Public

Survey data demonstrated that trust went up for 35% of North Carolinians, with the highest increases among Black (47%) and Hispanic/Latino (39%) populations. North Carolinians credited NCDHHS for delivering the health information and services they needed; 82% said that the Department met (59%) or exceeded (23%) their expectations.*

The NCDHHS COVID-19 Benchmarking Survey: Wave 7 was conducted online by Artemis Strategy Group from December 9-28, 2022, among 2100 North Carolina adults (ages 18+), including 676 Black residents and 277 Hispanic/Latino residents.)*



- **Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, NCDHHS developed 700 public service announcements and interviewed 289 North Carolinians on camera about their experience with COVID-19 and vaccination.** These campaigns were seen 27 million times, clicked 3 million times, and drove 20,000 visitors to NCDHHS websites each week. They generated 114,000 zip code searches for vaccines.
- **Reached 574,249 North Carolinians through 51 live streamed events, 31 Fireside Chats in English and 20 Cafecito’s in Spanish.** The topics covered chronic conditions and illnesses that disproportionately impact historically marginalized populations and drive health disparities.



Modernized Data Systems - and Use - for Decision-making

In a time when rapid data-driven responses to health threats are essential, the NCDHHS Division of Public Health has leveraged modern electronic data to transform its management of infectious diseases and outbreaks.

- **Linked data across benefit programs to identify 21,000 people who are likely eligible and not enrolled in other services by analyzing 82,000 NCCare360 clients' enrollment status in Medicaid, WIC, and SNAP.** The team then reached out to promote enrollment.
- **Developed a DPH Centralized Health Equity Data team to provide quality improvement** to the way the North Carolina State Center for Health Statistics gathers, processes, analyzes, interprets, publishes and communicates public health data.
- **Established the HBCU Health Equity Data Consortium led by North Carolina A&T** to engage community voices and model innovative approaches for understanding disparities in public health datasets, provide useful data to communities, and enhance public health workforce capacity.
- **Developed a dashboard to view available behavioral health beds as well as geographic trends for Emergency Department (ED) visits for behavioral health crises. The purpose of these interrelated efforts was to help providers redirect people in need to more appropriate facilities - especially with the surge of COVID cases.** The ED visit dashboard reflected data from 130 emergency departments on 4.1 million visits across 15 months, enabling analysis of trends. **The identified gaps resulted in a sizeable behavioral health investment from the NC General Assembly.**
- **Enhanced electronic data capture to rapidly monitor and respond to over 80 infectious diseases.** The pandemic catalyzed efforts to upgrade these systems and support a 10-fold increase of data intake. Increased access led to key developments in hospital-based surveillance, genotyping for outbreak identification, and wastewater pathogen monitoring, which ensured timely detection of public health threats.



Continued support of these functions puts North Carolina in the best position to care for our residents and avert public health threats.

- **Our specialized epidemiology staff and data systems supported state and local health departments for case and outbreak investigations, ultimately feeding data into dashboards for the public.** The team worked toward increasing data speed, improving data quality, assuring better analysis of how disease impacts sub-populations, and focusing outreach to the areas it will have the most impact. This helped to build successful response within existing epidemiology and laboratory capacity.
- **Developed public data dashboards to highlight trends and emerging public health concerns.** Partnering with emergency departments, hospitals and urgent cares across North Carolina allowed for rapid surveillance and dissemination of data. As a result of efficient data systems and increased data from partners, North Carolina could identify trends and be proactive in prevention and response measures.



Building laboratory capacity to serve North Carolinians: Identify Emerging Threats

Significant steps have been taken to enhance laboratory capacity, crucial for serving the state's residents and identifying emerging health threats. By investing in state-of-the-art technologies and fostering a skilled workforce, North Carolina is ensuring a robust defense against public health challenges, safeguarding the well-being of its communities now and in the future.

- **State Laboratory of Public Health (SLPH) enhanced logistics for samples to reach the lab faster, speeding results.** Leveraging COVID-19 funds, the lab partnered with the NC Department of Administration to develop a dedicated medical courier. This new service visits every Local Health Department every weekday to collect specimens and deliver to the lab on the same day. These improvements ensure compliance with clinical laboratory regulations and quality results.
- **Initiated lab-wide electronic test ordering and results system.** Based on experience with COVID-19, the State Laboratory is configuring an Electronic Test Orders and Results system for the entire lab. This system will minimize the use of paper and provide more efficient results reporting making it easier for providers to order and receive results for patient care.
- **Created a modernized lab space for efficiency, expanded capacity to meet today's needs and adaptability for the future.** Renovations to infectious diseases testing space and shared specimen processing areas have implemented best practices for safety and testing. A new addition to SLPH will be dedicated to the expansion of capacity for molecular sequencing, wastewater surveillance, and bioinformatics. By introducing flexible design into the renovation and construction, the lab will be able to adapt more easily to future needs and equipment changes.

