

# 21st Century Public Health Transformation

## NORTH CAROLINA



North Carolina is in the Southeastern region of the United States and has a population of 10.5 million people. The North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services is a superagency with a Division of Public Health (NCDPH). North Carolina public health governance is decentralized, meaning local health departments are local government entities. NCDPH is the state health department and works collaboratively with the North Carolina Association of Local Health Directors through statute, rule, contract, and regular state/local meetings. North Carolina envisions advancing innovative solutions that foster independence, improve health, and promote well-being for all North Carolinians.

### Transformation Approach

North Carolina's vision for public health transformation is driven by equity, rooted in a commitment to whole-person health, and responsive to the lessons learned responding to the greatest health crisis in a more than a generation. While the formal strategic visioning document is pending review, the draft priorities include:

- Strengthening foundational capabilities and capacities at the state level and across local health departments.
- Attracting and retaining a skilled and diverse workforce into the future.
- Improving operational effectiveness between state and local governments.
- Advancing performance, accountability, and transparency.
- Modernizing data infrastructure and optimize for use.
- Growing durable public health financing.

### Transformation & Equity Activities

A significant amount of work is underway to transform public health in North Carolina, including a transformational effort to amend the funding and accountability processes between state and local governments, a review of funding formulas to allocate more equitably, and an exploration of sharing resources among local health departments where it makes sense. Additionally, specific initiatives are underway to address the public health workforce that invest in strengthening Foundational Capabilities, as well to advance equity through local approaches. Where possible, North Carolina is using resources that address COVID-19 response and recovery to also transform public health.

North Carolina's public health transformation efforts center equity and specific objectives are embedded in the North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services' (NCDHHS) strategic plan. For example, there is a goal to advance health equity by reducing disparities in opportunity and outcomes for historically marginalized populations across the state. Within the state's transformation efforts, additional objectives include:

- Use data to hold NCDHHS and our partners accountable for equity.
- Create a culture of and structure for equity across the agency, including through training and hiring/recruiting practices.

North Carolina has a Community Health Worker initiative across all 100 counties, as well as a public-private partnership with community-based organizations, to reach underserved populations. The state also recruits external advisors from historically marginalized populations to contribute to the State Health Improvement Plan and Healthy North Carolina 2030 goals.

## Learnings & Next Steps

Emphasizing North Carolina's commitment to health equity, NCDHHS was the first government agency to sign the Health Equity Pledge, committing to using and sharing high-level data about race, ethnicity, language, and gender to inform best practices in promoting health equity. NCDHHS appointed the first Chief Health Equity Officer in 2021 with responsibility for leading the overarching strategy and operational goals to promote health equity, diversity, and inclusion across all the agency's health and human services.

Healthy North Carolina 2030, the state's decennial health goals, were developed by stakeholders across the state and focus on the social determinants of health. Data for the initiative is customizable for all stakeholders through a public dashboard and drives the State Health Improvement Plan.

## Recommendations & Call to Action

- Relationships and true partnerships are critical for making any shifts within governmental public health. As a decentralized state, the day-to-day informal and formal interactions between DCDPH and local health departments are invaluable in moving forward with a shared agenda.
- Don't shy away from incremental change with an eye toward long term goals. Baby steps add up to bold change overtime.
- Before leaning in on a "new" idea, pause and see what's been done before, including in other states to apply their lessons first.

**"It is not enough to improve the public health architecture and strengthen our core capacities. We must also be deliberate in our efforts to earn trust and address inequities throughout our system."**

*Mark Benson, Assistant Secretary for Public Health, North Carolina*