

# Public health works every day to promote and protect health, and prevent disease.

## What do local health departments do for North Carolina?

### PROTECT

**Local health departments safeguard against outbreaks, illness and disease.** Every day, teams of nurses, epidemiologists, scientists, and environmental specialists work to protect the public from health threats. Can you imagine living in a community that did not have people working every day to:

- **Prevent the occurrence and spread of disease.** Local health departments work with hospitals, nursing homes, schools, environmental health agencies, physicians, laboratories, citizens, and federal agencies to target the cause and source of disease, and then determine the appropriate response.
- **Keep food and physical environments safe.** Restaurant food we eat, hotels we visit and daycares where our children play are all safer thanks to environmental health specialists in each county. Lead, pesticides and water pollution all can be harmful to health. Health departments minimize these hazards through routine inspections and education.
- **Prepare for and respond to disasters and emergencies.** Local health departments work with emergency management and other local officials to plan for and respond to natural disasters, novel disease outbreaks, and bioterrorism threats that can dramatically impact health.

**Example.** *North Carolina's State Fair drew national attention last year after an e-coli outbreak resulted in 27 cases, spanning 7 counties, resulting in 5 hospitalized in serious condition and 4 on dialysis. The investigation took boots on the ground...health departments who participated in the investigation, monitored local hospitals and doctors' offices, informed the public, and helped to contain the incident. Each year roughly 1 in 6 Americans (48 million people) gets sick, 128,000 are hospitalized, and 3,000 die of food borne diseases.*

### PREVENT

**Local health departments carry out locally driven education, promotion and prevention strategies, often serving as a safety net for those most in need of care.** We know prevention works and access to health services cuts costs for everyone *and* keeps people healthy.

- **Promote better health throughout the lifespan.** We use proven programs to make healthy choices easier. Local health departments provide services and support policies to help young people stay well and develop into healthy adults. We offer education and services to help reduce chronic illness and complications. Focusing on prevention helps us lower school and worker absenteeism while lowering health insurance premiums and improving the quality of life in our community.
- **Assure access to quality health care services.** We evaluate and augment the health service capacity of the community, including: care for pregnant women, immunizations for all ages, and dental care for children.

**Example.** *In 2010, North Carolina's infant mortality rate declined sharply to the lowest level in state history. The current rate represents an 11.4 percent drop in the state's infant mortality rate. The trend underscores the impact of public health programs aimed at improving birth outcomes and maternal and child health.*

### PROMOTE

**Local health departments promote community and economic health through systems change.** Health is good business for everyone. Guided by data, we work with partners to build healthy communities for everyone.

- **Uphold policies we know improve our community's health.** Better foods in our schools, more physical activity, and smoke-free places are examples of policies that have a major impact on the health of our children and neighbors and the potential for positive growth in our local economies.
- **Continuously assess needs and improve capacity to promote better health.** Whether assessing community health, implementing quality improvement efforts, or pursuing accreditation, local health departments maximize opportunities to improve public health practice and promote the public's health.

**Example.** *North Carolina's smoke-free restaurants and bars law is both effective and popular. This policy change is contributing to a 21 percent decrease in emergency room visits for heart attacks, improving air quality by 89 percent in those venues and earning high approval ratings in a recent poll.*

# Investing in North Carolina's health: **What makes local health departments strong and effective?**

## OPERATIONAL FOUNDATION

### A solid foundation of funding and expertise

- **Continued local support with sustained and flexible funding to address our community's changing and core public health needs.** Promoting and protecting our community's health is essential to quality of life and to the economic competitiveness and vitality of our communities. Now more than ever, adequate financial support is necessary to make local health departments strong and ready to respond to community needs.
- **Executives equipped with the training and expertise to lead a local health department.** Managing a health department requires strategic vision, detailed understanding of public health program requirements and best practices, and strong and sustained community relationships. Health directors and other senior executives must have the training and practical experience necessary to navigate the complexities of the system while coordinating with stakeholders to address community health needs.
- **Active and engaged local boards of health for health departments across North Carolina.** Since 1877, board of health member volunteers and content experts have served their communities, providing public oversight, advising and deciding on public health policy, depoliticizing public health, and promoting fiscal accountability. Maintaining this governance structure is critical to a local health department's success in our state.

## INFRASTRUCTURE

### Support for local public health's infrastructure

- **Local facilities to ensure access to public health services.** In many communities, local health departments are essential providers of primary care, maternal and child health services, and nutritional services for our working poor and for others without insurance. Facilities must be located within our communities to help ensure access to these and other public health direct services.
- **Health information technology to better target and improve the quality of prevention and patient care and to reduce health care costs.** Local health departments need powerful health information technologies to provide a true medical home for its patients, to avoid duplication of services, to enhance staff productivity, and to better target our public health priorities.
- **Trained professionals within various disciplines of public health working diligently to continue proven efforts in a fast-moving, changing environment.** Nursing, health promotion, environmental health, and community health are all essential components of an action oriented and effective public health model in our state.

## PARTNERSHIPS

### Strong and coordinated collaboration

- **Working with community partners ensures public health programs are effective.** Our schools, churches, businesses, nonprofits, and medical professionals are all partners who have a fundamental interest and role in maintaining a healthy community. Local public health departments serve at the core of these collaborations, convening partners and coordinating efforts to maximize buy-in and improve program impact.
- **Continued commitment from every level of government to support the mission of public health.** In a decentralized system like North Carolina's, local health departments provide "boots-on-the-ground" public health services. Financial and technical support from state and Federal agencies makes this possible. Adequate support and coordination must continue if local health departments are to continue providing many of their clinical, preventive, and surveillance services that have established NC as a national model of public health.