



MESSAGE FROM THE SECRETARY

Our goal is clear, a healthier state that meets the needs of all North Carolinians. Our approach is simple: meet people where they are. The NC Department of Health and Human Services 2024-2026 Strategic Plan outlines our key priorities and efforts for the next two years, and reflects insights from staff across the organization.

The initiatives detailed in this plan build on many recent successes. Most notably, our most recent and significant milestone of expanding Medicaid. Over 600,000 people in our state now have access to healthcare, and we're not stopping there. We've also got big plans to invest \$835 million in behavioral health and resilience, ensuring everyone gets the care they need, when they need it. Reflecting on the past few years, we've celebrated many important milestones: launching our Division of Child and Family Well-Being, the 988-crisis line, and Inclusion Works. Raising Medicaid reimbursement rates for behavioral health services for the first time in over a decade, national accreditation for the Division of Public Health, and the opening of a new youth behavioral health facility. Significant policy updates, such as nationally expanded eligibility for blood donation that defers donors for risky behaviors, not for who they are.

Our commitment starts with tangible actions to advance health. This strategic plan champions behavioral health and resilience through investments in coordinated care systems, innovative solutions, and bolstering a robust direct care and behavioral health workforce. Knowing that our workforce is the backbone of our mission, the strategic plan highlights our blueprint to build a strong and inclusive workforce that supports early learning, health, and wellness across the state. Strengthening our early learning workforce is one of many ways we are committed to investing in child and family well-being, making it easier for children and families to access the health care, programs, and supports they need to thrive. At the root of these efforts is a focus on achieving operational excellence – streamlining processes and services to ensure efficiency and innovation. It will take cross-departmental coordination and dedicated attention to achieve such an effort – something our team has demonstrated time and time again.

The following pages provide a glimpse into the strategic vision of NCDHHS's future. I am honored to work alongside such an exceptional group of individuals and proud to be on a team who share an unwavering commitment and dedication to the health and wellbeing of North Carolinians. Together, we are poised for continued positive impact and transformative change in the coming years.

My best,



Kody H. Kinsley | Secretary
NC Department of Health and Human Services



INTRODUCTION

The North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services 2024-2026 Strategic Plan is grounded in the Department's values, galvanized by our commitment to eliminate disparities as we champion whole-person health, and optimized by the lessons learned responding to the greatest health crisis in more than a generation.

NCDHHS will further advance its mission to improve the health, safety, and well-being of all North Carolinians by addressing whole person needs and working toward the following goals:

- 1.** Advance **health** by increasing opportunity and improving outcomes for people who face greater health and situational challenges within NCDHHS and across the state.
- 2.** Promote **child and family well-being** by making it easier for children and families to access the health care, programs, and supports they need to thrive.
- 3.** Support **behavioral health and resilience** by prioritizing investments in coordinated systems of care that make services easy to access when and where they are needed and reduce the stigma around accessing these services.
- 4.** Build a **strong and inclusive workforce** that supports early learning, health, and wellness across North Carolina. This includes investigating opportunities to further build workforce pipelines, forge career pathways, and promote inclusive employment strategies that will support a workforce that is ready for our next challenge and is reflective of our communities.
- 5.** Achieve **operational excellence** by enabling efficient, effective, and innovative processes and services.

The plan outlines objectives and strategies to be implemented over the next two years to make progress on these five goals. The work is interconnected. While strategies may only appear once, they often contribute to multiple objectives and goals across the plan.

Finally, the Strategic Plan was created in the context of one of North Carolina's largest health care changes. On March 27, 2023, Governor Cooper signed a law to expand Medicaid under the Affordable Care Act, delivering access to health insurance for over 600,000 additional North Carolinians. This is one of the most important tools to advance the goals of our Strategic Plan, and all the strategies will be oriented toward operationalizing Medicaid Expansion in an efficient, effective, and equitable manner.

MISSION

In collaboration with our partners, the North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services provides essential services to improve the health, safety, and well-being of all North Carolinians.

VISION

Advancing innovative solutions that foster independence, improve health, and promote well-being for all North Carolinians.

VALUES



Belonging: Intentionally promote an inclusive, equitable workplace that reflects the communities we serve, where everyone feels a sense of belonging, and our diverse backgrounds and experiences are valued and recognized as strengths.



Joy: Have joy and balance at work so we all bring our A-game when serving the people of North Carolina.

BACKGROUND

The North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services (NCDHHS) touches the lives of every North Carolinian, and its priorities highlight the vast range of programs it administers and populations it serves.

The Strategic Plan does not describe all the important and essential work undertaken by the Department. Instead, the plan lays out the priorities over the next two years that will take cross-departmental coordination and dedicated attention to be achieved. We are committed to action that achieves outcomes and are dedicating resources to support implementation of the plan. We will work collaboratively across the Department, and with partners and stakeholders across the state, to realize these goals. The following efforts guide our work across all of the goals and strategies outlined in the plan.

MEDICAID EXPANSION

Medicaid Expansion is a once-in-a-generation investment that is expected to bring health care coverage to an additional 600,000 North Carolinians. NCDHHS is preparing to operationalize Medicaid expansion with the core objective to maximize federal resources in order to minimize health care coverage gaps and increase access to care for North Carolinians. Implementation will address challenges that create differences in access to health care, including in urban and rural communities, and in groups of people who are more likely to develop specific conditions.

NCDHHS will work closely with partners across the state to increase awareness of eligibility, reduce barriers to enrollment and support people through the enrollment process. It will use a data-driven approach, enroll eligible people in a timely manner and with a high degree of accuracy, provide timely and high-quality access to physical and behavioral health care, and minimize duplication of work.

COVID RESPONSE AND RECOVERY

As COVID-19 began, communities faced challenges with access to health care as well as housing, food, and other needs. The pandemic response began to address those gaps with new resources that allowed us to reach people across North Carolina in ways that we had not before. NCDHHS quickly implemented many innovative ways to address health needs and address disparities during COVID-19. We knew that the landscape would change eventually, and our commitment is stronger than ever to continue to provide better access to services and supports across the board.

VALUES



People-Focused: Focus on the people we serve, deliver value and make a positive impact on their lives and communities.



Proactive Communication: Maintain an open and trusting environment for collaboration and continuous improvement with our team, stakeholders and the people we serve.



Stewardship: Be good stewards of resources and time to create a positive impact for those we serve.



Teamwork: We are all one department, one team, working toward one goal: to improve the health, safety and well-being of all North Carolinians.



Transparency: Share expertise, information and honest feedback within the Department and with stakeholders and the community. Ask for help when needed.



NCDHHS continues to monitor trends in COVID and other respiratory illnesses as part of its routine public health surveillance, and we are ready to respond if the situation changes.

NCDHHS has ended its support for COVID-specific response, including vaccination events, testing sites, and test-to-treat programs. It is transitioning its focus to building the long-term infrastructure to respond to the many long-term issues surfaced by COVID. This includes investing in our health care and public health workforce, increasing state and local readiness for future public health emergencies, and addressing the long-standing differences in health access and outcomes that COVID exacerbated.

WHOLE PERSON HEALTH

All North Carolinians should have the opportunity for good health. That opportunity begins where people live, learn, work and play; it begins with our families, neighborhoods and communities. By investing in the health and well-being of all North Carolinians, we are investing in the health and vitality of our state. By using our dollars more strategically, we will not just buy health care, we will buy good health outcomes.

Underpinning the strategies in this plan is the foundational goal to build an innovative, coordinated, and whole person — physical, behavioral and social health-centered – system that addresses both medical and non-medical drivers of health. Health can be a secondary concern when a person is worried about their next meal or can't pay rent. Yet the access to food and housing, for example, both contribute to creating and sustaining good health while the lack thereof create health risks and poor health outcomes.

Strategic interventions and investments in primary drivers of health, such as food, housing, transportation, employment and interpersonal safety, in partnership with local community groups and health care providers, will help us meet our mission of improving health, safety and well-being for all North Carolinians. It will also provide short- and long-term cost savings and make our health care system more efficient.

NCDHHS is committed to creating a statewide framework and infrastructure that can support the needed innovation in our public and private sector and promote opportunities for whole person health for all North Carolinians.

IMPROVING HEALTH ACCESS

Improving health access and reducing health disparities are both goals with specific strategies in this plan, and the lens through which the plan will be implemented. NCDHHS will work to promote and advocate for access to the health and human services that all North Carolinians need to be healthy and thrive regardless of their geographic location or other situations in life. A critical component of this work is supporting individuals with disabilities and older adults in leading safe, healthy and fulfilling lives.

NCDHHS is also committed to leading by example as an employer that sustains a community and a work environment that is welcoming, respectful, and encouraging of successful outcomes. Our goal is to intentionally promote a workplace that reflects the communities we serve and where our many different backgrounds and experiences are valued and recognized as strengths.

GOAL 1: Advance health by increasing opportunity and outcomes for people who face greater health and situational challenges within NCDHHS and across the state.

OBJECTIVE 1: Support local capacity to overcome persistent health inequities.

- ▶ **Strategy 1.1:** Build the Department's understanding of how to reduce disparities in health outcomes and create a workforce that reflects the communities we serve, and apply the frameworks to achieve both goals, through technical assistance, consultation, staff training, and ongoing professional development.
- ▶ **Strategy 1.2:** Enable each division and office to create plans that articulate how their work will improve health outcomes and reduce health disparities in North Carolina.
- ▶ **Strategy 1.3:** Leverage data to audit pay disparities and labor market salary benchmarks to inform efforts to improve pay disparities to recruit and retain qualified NCDHHS staff.
- ▶ **Strategy 1.4:** Create a stronger and more inclusive workforce reflective of the communities we serve through improving the attraction, recruitment, and retention of staff, including leveraging data to target efforts throughout the recruitment-to-hire process.

OBJECTIVE 2: Use data to hold ourselves and our partners accountable.

- ▶ **Strategy 2.1:** Build and expand key metrics, reporting, and dashboards that identify and monitor health disparities, including racial and ethnic gaps in key health outcomes, to drive action and provide transparency into initiatives that reduce disparities and improve health access.
- ▶ **Strategy 2.2:** Improve data and technology infrastructure to increase access to services and make the process to apply for and use NCDHHS-administered benefits and services easier, more convenient, and more human-centered.
- ▶ **Strategy 2.3:** Together with our partners, strengthen our systems' ability to track health outcomes for populations who experience greater impact from disease or negative health outcomes to more rapidly identify emerging issues and better tailor interventions to address ongoing health disparities.
- ▶ **Strategy 2.4:** Use data-driven decision-making to create a framework that identifies and resolves issues that impede access to health care and other services.
- ▶ **Strategy 2.5:** Develop and track metrics that show each of the department's strategic priority areas contributing to reducing disparities in health outcomes.

OBJECTIVE 3: Mitigate barriers to access of health services.

- ▶ **Strategy 3.1:** Work to ensure North Carolina health care providers better reflect the diversity of North Carolina's population.
- ▶ **Strategy 3.2:** Improve health access by working with DIT to increase access to broadband across NC and increasing telehealth access and use among providers and people.
- ▶ **Strategy 3.3:** Communicate and promote culturally competent and accessible health information and support our partners in providing those communications.
- ▶ **Strategy 3.4:** Increase access to primary care in rural and underserved areas with a focus on adults with incomes up to 200% of the federal poverty level.
- ▶ **Strategy 3.5:** Support people of all stages and ages of life with and without disabilities to live, work, and play within communities of their choice to the fullest extent possible by providing community-based services in the most integrated setting appropriate to the person's needs.

OBJECTIVE 4: Invest in the capacity of our partners to overcome persistent health disparities.

- ▶ **Strategy 4.1:** Maintain and expand public/private partnerships that invest in state, regional, and community partners who focus on overcoming barriers and health disparities.
- ▶ **Strategy 4.2:** Ensure a trained workforce of community health worker (CHWs) to serve as trusted connections between health and human services systems and communities.
- ▶ **Strategy 4.3:** Provide coordination, training, and support to our partners working to reduce gaps in health access and outcomes across the state, including community-based organizations, educational institutions, faith-based organizations, providers, local governments, tribal partners, and others.
- ▶ **Strategy 4.4:** Operationalize Medicaid expansion by decreasing gaps in enrollment that emerge in urban and rural areas or between racial, ethnic, and other demographics.

GOAL 2: Promote child and family well-being by making it easier for children and families to access the health care, programs, and supports they need.

OBJECTIVE 1: Strengthen capacity to meet the behavioral and mental health needs of North Carolina children and families.

- ▶ **Strategy 1.1:** Deliver Youth Mental Health First Aid to teachers and school staff throughout the state.
- ▶ **Strategy 1.2:** Increase awareness and use of key child behavioral health metrics through the rollout of a child behavioral health dashboard to key partner groups.
- ▶ **Strategy 1.3:** Expand the NC Psychiatric Access Line (NC-PAL) pediatric consultation and training for primary care physicians and other child-serving partners (i.e., REACH trainings) to reduce waiting times, placement disruptions, and need for crisis interventions.
- ▶ **Strategy 1.4:** Increase access to specialty behavioral health services for the growing number of children with complex behavioral health needs to better meet their needs and divert children from inappropriate stays in emergency rooms and other settings.
- ▶ **Strategy 1.5:** Address the behavioral health needs of children in early childhood by providing trauma informed/resiliency focused trainings to early childhood education providers across the state and community-based staff in the Division of Child Development and Early Education (DCDEE) across NC.

OBJECTIVE 2: Reform North Carolina's child welfare and social services systems to improve child outcomes in safety, permanency, and well-being and increase transparency and accountability.

- ▶ **Strategy 2.1:** Launch the Child and Family Specialty Plan to support the health care needs of children and youth who are currently or were formerly involved in the child welfare system.
- ▶ **Strategy 2.2:** Update the child welfare information system to improve functionality and increase utilization.
- ▶ **Strategy 2.3:** Implement a Regional Support model for social service agencies to deploy continuous quality improvement and technical assistance more effectively and efficiently across the state.
- ▶ **Strategy 2.4:** Provide financial supports to kinship providers to increase the number of foster-care involved youth who are placed in kinship care.

OBJECTIVE 3: Improve nutrition security for children and families.

- ▶ **Strategy 3.1:** Increase the availability and array of timely nutrition support services through the NCCARE360 referral platform by recruiting additional community-based organizations that address food insecurity.
- ▶ **Strategy 3.2:** Increase enrollment of eligible families in the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) and Food and Nutrition Services (FNS) through data linkages and tailored outreach.
- ▶ **Strategy 3.3:** Launch a statewide breastfeeding hotline to increase access to breastfeeding supports for parents.
- ▶ **Strategy 3.4:** Provide appropriate level of breastfeeding training using the WIC Breastfeeding Curriculum for local and state WIC agency workforce.
- ▶ **Strategy 3.5:** Operate and monitor implementation of the Healthy Opportunities Pilots (HOP) to test the integration of non-medical drivers of health into the health care delivery system and identify most effective use of Medicaid dollars to pay for high value food and nutrition services and other non-medical health related services.

OBJECTIVE 4: Improve women's health and birth outcomes.

- ▶ **Strategy 4.1:** Work with doulas and partners across North Carolina to expand access to doula services.
- ▶ **Strategy 4.2:** Increase Medicaid obstetric maternal bundle payments for pregnancy care and develop an enhanced payment for group prenatal care.
- ▶ **Strategy 4.3:** Improve access to and utilization of first trimester prenatal care and comprehensive prenatal care through PHP quality improvement activities.
- ▶ **Strategy 4.4:** Increase access to all methods of contraception, including increasing pharmacist-dispensed contraception and same-day access to all methods of contraception.
- ▶ **Strategy 4.5:** Expand syphilis testing through public awareness initiatives, provider engagement, and test availability to reduce congenital syphilis rates.

GOAL 3: Support behavioral health and resilience by prioritizing investments in coordinated systems of care that make mental health services easy to access when and where they are needed and reduce the stigma around accessing these services.

OBJECTIVE 1: Promote behavioral and physical health care integration.

- ▶ **Strategy 1.1:** Increase use of the evidence-based Collaborative Care Model in NC primary care providers to provide greater access to integrated, whole person health.
- ▶ **Strategy 1.2:** Launch Certified Community Behavioral Health Clinics (CCBHC) pilots to expand behavioral health service access in community-based settings.
- ▶ **Strategy 1.3:** Operationalize Tailored Care Management systemwide to meet the whole person health needs of beneficiaries with complex behavioral health and intellectual or developmental disability (IDD).

OBJECTIVE 2: Expand access to behavioral health supports for people involved in the justice system.

- ▶ **Strategy 2.1:** Pilot programs to offer capacity restoration services in community-based settings and in detention centers, with the goal of providing greater access to capacity restoration services for individuals deemed incapable to proceed, that allows their legal charges to be resolved more quickly and increases access to state psychiatric hospital beds.
- ▶ **Strategy 2.2:** Increase the number of programs that divert people away from incarceration and into appropriate behavioral health treatment and/or IDD supports.
- ▶ **Strategy 2.3:** Increase the number of counties that offer programs that coordinate care for people re-entering the community after incarceration to ensure successful reintegration.
- ▶ **Strategy 2.4:** Pilot non-law enforcement involuntary commitment transportation.

OBJECTIVE 3: Increase access to crisis services.

- ▶ **Strategy 3.1:** Implement 988, including associated peer warm line, and improve crisis infrastructure via increasing mobile crisis and facility-based crisis/respite options for North Carolinians to expand rapid access to crisis services.
- ▶ **Strategy 3.2:** Implement increase in Medicaid Behavioral Health Rates to improve access to all behavioral health services and promote early intervention.
- ▶ **Strategy 3.3:** Create a statewide behavioral health referral network for providers that will identify, unify, and track mental health, IDD and substance use disorder inpatient and residential treatment resources, including bed availability, in a single, common network.

OBJECTIVE 4: Turn the tide on North Carolina's opioid and substance use crisis.

- ▶ **Strategy 4.1:** Implement mobile medication-assisted treatment to increase access to evidence-based addiction treatment.
- ▶ **Strategy 4.2:** Invest in long-term support for harm reduction programs and expand their ability to increase drug checking to prevent overdoses from contamination.
- ▶ **Strategy 4.3:** Increase the consistency and quality of Medicaid and state-funded addiction treatment services by aligning them to American Society of Addiction Medicine Criteria.

OBJECTIVE 5: Improve behavioral health data infrastructure and utilization.

- ▶ **Strategy 5.1:** Create a data infrastructure that collects comprehensive data on behavioral health holds in NC emergency departments.
- ▶ **Strategy 5.2:** Implement Behavioral Health Syndromic Surveillance using NC DETECT for earlier identification of trends by December 2024.
- ▶ **Strategy 5.3:** Implement Electronic Health Records in state psychiatric hospitals to standardize health information, provide real-time records, and better manage patients' health information leading to better managed care, health care, health care outcomes, and strengthen recruitment of health care practitioners.
- ▶ **Strategy 5.4:** Create a public-facing LME/MCO dashboard that measures key outcomes in North Carolina's behavioral health and IDD systems.

GOAL 4: Build a strong and inclusive workforce that supports early learning, health, and wellness across North Carolina. This includes investigating opportunities to further build workforce pipelines, forge career pathways, and promote inclusive employment strategies that will support a workforce that is ready for our next challenge and is reflective of our communities.

OBJECTIVE 1: Invest in a robust caregiving workforce and build a coordinated infrastructure to address long-term caregiving workforce needs in an inclusive and equitable way.

- ▶ **Strategy 1.1:** Establish a governance structure for long-term planning to meet North Carolina's health caregiving workforce needs in an inclusive and equitable way, to support strong health workforces across the state.
- ▶ **Strategy 1.2:** Create coordinated recommendations and an action plan to address North Carolina's most pressing health caregiving workforce needs.
- ▶ **Strategy 1.3:** Grow the Direct Care workforce that serves older adults and individuals with disabilities (including Home Health Aides, Personal Care Assistants, Certified Nursing Assistants, and Direct Support Professionals, among others) by improving recruitment, education, & retention for direct care positions.
- ▶ **Strategy 1.4:** Improve compensation for Direct Care workers in collaboration with partners to bolster recruitment and retention.

OBJECTIVE 2: Invest in the Early Childhood workforce to expand access to high quality early care and education programs.

- ▶ **Strategy 2.1:** Support pathways that increase enrollment in Early Childhood teacher education and credentialing.
- ▶ **Strategy 2.2:** Develop dedicated funding stream for increasing Early Childhood educator compensation in collaboration with partners, to support recruitment and retention.

OBJECTIVE 3: Lead by example as an equitable workplace that lives its values.

- ▶ **Strategy 3.1:** Develop and adopt a formal, comprehensive recruitment strategy for the Department to provide critical health and human services to North Carolina.
- ▶ **Strategy 3.2:** Provide an array of training opportunities to support NCDHHS staff's professional growth and development, expand their perspectives, and improve retention.
- ▶ **Strategy 3.3:** Develop a transparent process for addressing the loss of positions from grant funds and to provide priority assistance for divisions/offices/individuals for funding options and alternative positions.
- ▶ **Strategy 3.4:** Create an NCDHHS workforce increasingly reflective of the community we serve through data-driven strategies to recruit and retain employees, for NCDHHS to best support its diverse teams and the varied communities it serves.

OBJECTIVE 4: Support our public health and child welfare workforce at both the state and local levels.

- ▶ **Strategy 4.1:** Bolster public health recruitment and retention through workforce planning & management.
- ▶ **Strategy 4.2:** Improve diversity, equity, & inclusion in NC's Public Health Workforce.
- ▶ **Strategy 4.3:** Recruit & expand talent pools for Child Welfare at State and County level to support children and families.

GOAL 5: Achieve operational excellence by enabling efficient, effective, and innovative processes and services.

OBJECTIVE 1: Foster data-driven decision making across the Department to continue to grow the efficiency, effectiveness, and impact of services delivered to North Carolinians.

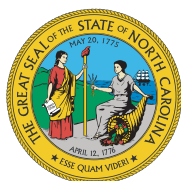
- ▶ **Strategy 1.1:** Invest in an enterprise data platform to support more seamless data collection, ingestion, integration, storage, and accessibility for NCDHHS employees and our partners, and ensure that data governance both protects data security and fosters coordination.
- ▶ **Strategy 1.2:** Create professional development opportunities to equip staff with the knowledge and resources to leverage data to inform decision-making.
- ▶ **Strategy 1.3:** Implement a biennial Employee Engagement Survey to evaluate the satisfaction of employees across the Department and identify areas for improvement.

OBJECTIVE 2: Be effective stewards of State resources and foster a culture that enables continuous review and improvement of Department processes and services.

- ▶ **Strategy 2.1:** Enhance processes to track the use of key funding pools and plan for sustainable solutions to changes in funding, including division-level budgets, new and existing Federal funding, block grants, and Federal COVID-19 funding.
- ▶ **Strategy 2.2:** Develop and implement innovative contracting strategies to create efficient contracting processes that help achieve our goals; leverage dashboards to provide data and insight into each step of the procurement process.
- ▶ **Strategy 2.3:** Develop and implement innovative strategies to increase efficiency and standardization in HR processes; improve tracking and visibility of each step of the process.
- ▶ **Strategy 2.4:** Work with partners across the State to implement a new North Carolina Financial System to improve efficiency in financial oversight and controls.
- ▶ **Strategy 2.5:** Increase efficiencies in the invoice process to ensure timely payment to providers and vendors.
- ▶ **Strategy 2.6:** Identify and implement energy conservation strategies to reduce energy consumption per square foot of NCDHHS state-owned buildings by at least 40% from fiscal year 2002-2003 levels.
- ▶ **Strategy 2.7:** Foster a culture of continuous quality improvement by establishing professional development opportunities for staff to enable continuous review and improvement of Department processes and services.
- ▶ **Strategy 2.8:** Develop and implement improved processes and tools to effectively track and respond to bill reviews, public information requests, and media requests.

OBJECTIVE 3: Ensure that NCDHHS is staffed and organized to meet its goals and sustain quality services.

- ▶ **Strategy 3.1:** Create a staffing strategy that reduces the vacancy rate across the Department and creates stability and continuity of high-quality services.
- ▶ **Strategy 3.2:** Develop and implement a staffing and funding structure to ensure the sustainability of Data Office functions.
- ▶ **Strategy 3.3:** Collaborate with the NC Department of Administration in delivering Phases I, II, and III of the New NCDHHS Campus project.
- ▶ **Strategy 3.4:** Grow the operation and infrastructure needed to strengthen the cybersecurity of the organization.



NC DEPARTMENT OF
**HEALTH AND
HUMAN SERVICES**