



Laura Edwards, RN, MPA

Director, Center for Healthy North Carolina

Tell us a little bit about your background. How did you end up in your current position as Director of the Center for Healthy North Carolina?

I've been an RN for almost 30 years, and have a Bachelor's degree in Health Occupations Education and a Master's in Public Administration. For the first half of my career, I worked in a variety of healthcare settings. In 1997 I applied for a job at Wake Health Services (a community health center in Raleigh, NC). At the time I had no idea what a community health center was, but I quickly learned I was very passionate about this realm because it's about serving the underserved and uninsured. I then served as the Clinical Director at the North Carolina Community Health Center Association from 2000-2006 before joining the NC Division of Public Health, Chronic Disease and Injury Section as the Coordinator of the NC Kidney Program and NC Epilepsy Program. During my time at DPH, I was also responsible for development and oversight of NC's American Diabetes Association (ADA) Education Recognition Program in which DPH applied to the ADA to become an "umbrella" recognized program to provide diabetes self-management education with local health departments across the state. I was very involved in the development of the Healthy North Carolina 2020 objectives. In 2011, The Duke Endowment provided funding to establish the Center for Healthy North Carolina, and I am honored to have been involved in creating the Center.

Tell us a little bit about the Center for Healthy North Carolina and its relationship with the Healthy North Carolina 2020 program.

The Center for Healthy North Carolina (CHNC) is funded by the Duke Endowment, and we work in close partnership with the NC Division of Public Health and other partners such as the Center for Public Health Quality and Care Share Health Alliance. CHNC works to build capacity in communities across NC to implement evidence-based strategies for community-identified health priorities that are also related to the Healthy North Carolina 2020 objectives in order to move North Carolina to "A Better State of Health." CHNC serves as a liaison to technical assistance and resources for local

health departments, Healthy Carolinians partnerships and other community coalitions. CHNC utilizes the overarching framework of the HNC 2020 objectives to promote the widespread adoption of evidence-based strategies to achieve improved population health outcomes and focuses on creating public-private partnerships for sustainability.

Why are you passionate about public health? What motivates you to go to work every day?

What's important to me is to know that something I've done has made a difference in someone else's life. As a native North Carolinian, I feel very fortunate to be a part of CHNC and it is very fulfilling to know that CHNC is already making an impact across our state.

As you've already mentioned, the healthcare landscape continues to evolve, and this will no doubt continue. What do you see as the primary opportunities for public health organizations?

We need to grow the public health workforce, and more specifically, we need to grow public health leaders. With the budget cuts, retirements and turnover, NC has lost a lot of capacity and institutional history at both the state and local level.

You mentioned leadership development. What other things do you see as primary challenges for public health organizations?

Funding and budget cuts are impacting the ability of local and state health departments to provide the 10 essential public health services to the community. And in general, we are facing very limited resources for mental health and substance abuse.

What do public health organizations need in order to be successful?

We need more leadership, flexibility and ingenuity. We can't sustain our current level of care with the oncoming challenges presented by an aging population and the

current level of chronic disease and obesity. We need to look outside of our traditional partnerships and consider more non-traditional relationships between the public and private sectors. And we all need to advocate for public health funding and programs at the state and local levels.

What are some specific actions public health organizations can take to move toward being more successful?

We will all be more successful if we include other entities that need to be at the table, engage in public-private partnerships and work with community coalitions. We need to keep in mind that health impacts everything. Health goes beyond clinical care, and includes environment and policy, and health determinants such as education, poverty and affordable housing. We need to broaden our scope and be aware of social disparities that have an impact on community health. Overall, prevention needs to be our main focus in improving population health.

What's your vision for where public health will be five years from now?

Of course, it will be different in North Carolina. I expect there will be more regional initiatives with local health departments. We'll have a bigger focus on population health, and on social determinants of health. There will be a much bigger emphasis on prevention.

What advice would you give to those who support or partner with organizations in the public health space? How can we better serve organizations like yours?

Come to the table! And leave your own agenda at home. We need to focus on the community's overall health, rather than our own siloed views – and of course we all have them. But we can't do everything – there are not enough resources to do it all. If we could focus on a few priorities and everyone could work together on those, we could potentially move the needle in those key areas.

About Laura Edwards, RN, MPA

Director, Center for Healthy North Carolina

As a Registered Nurse, Laura Edwards has been dedicated to serving the underserved throughout her career. With experience in a variety of healthcare settings, Laura began working in public/community health more than 15 years ago and knew she had found her passion. In 2010, she began to work to improve the health of all North Carolinians through implementation of the NC Prevention Action Plan, followed in 2011 by dissemination of the Healthy NC 2020 (HNC2020) objectives and now with a focus on implementation of evidence-based strategies. In her role as Director of the Center for Healthy North Carolina, she is dedicated to population health improvement and believes that interventions based on community needs and priorities are the way to move NC to "A Better State of Health." Laura is committed to building capacity in communities across NC for the implementation of evidence-based strategies, addressing community-identified health priorities that align with HNC2020 objectives by linking community groups and organizations to existing resources, and identifying strategies for sustainability. She serves as North Carolina's Healthy People 2020 Coordinator and has been the state lead for the County Health Rankings since the rankings were first released.

Laura is an active member of many public health organizations. She serves on the Governing Council for NCPHA, the Executive Committee for NC SOPHE, the Center for Public Health Quality Advisory Board, the NC Farmworker Health Program Advisory Board and the Wake Health Services Advisory Board Healthcare Quality and Operations Committee. Laura is a sought-after speaker, and has presented in local, statewide and national forums.

About Healthy North Carolina 2020

Healthy NC 2020 serves as North Carolina's health improvement plan, which will address and improve the state's most pressing health priorities. The Healthy North Carolina 2020 health objectives address all aspects of health with the aim of improving the health status of every North Carolinian. Through Healthy NC 2020, the NC Department of Health and Human Services hopes to mobilize the state to achieve a common set of health objectives.

For more on Healthy North Carolina 2020: A Better State of Health, visit www.publichealth.nc.gov/hnc2020.

Patagonia Health Inc.

1915 Evans Road
Cary NC 27513

Email: info@patagoniahealth.com
Phone: (919) 238-4780
Fax: (919) 238-7920

Web: www.patagoniahealth.com

