



State of the County Health Report 2023



Human Services

Progress on CHIPs

The Union County Community Health Improvement Plan (CHIP) was submitted in September 2023 and identifies three priorities and associated performance metrics. The information below describes the progress made in 2023 towards our CHIP:

Priority 1: Affordable Housing and Homelessness

Thrive! Union, a collaboration of individuals and diverse organizations with the mission of alleviating poverty and increasing economic mobility, put together a housing symposium, which was held on March 6th. Community partners and decision-makers were invited to attend the symposium to increase their awareness of the issue and to promote policy change.

Priority 2: Mental Health

The Behavioral Health Collaborative provided mental health and social work services to 7,947 students in Union County Public Schools.

Union County Public Schools (UCPS), Atrium Health, and Partners Health Management delivered five Mental Health First Aid Courses to 57 participants.

Union County Public Schools continued to deliver messaging via social media on bullying prevention and mental health awareness.

Union County Government posted mental health awareness messages or education on social media and the community newsletter (Horizon) on the following topics: Suicide Awareness and Prevention, Veterans in Suicidal Crisis, Teen Dating Violence Awareness, Mental Health Awareness, and Domestic Violence Awareness.

The Mental Health Crisis Solutions Group met six times between September 2022 and June 2023 and identified the following top gaps in services in Union County: Emergency/ Crisis Stabilization for Youth & Adults, Treatment/ Placement Options for Youth and Adults with Neurocognitive Challenges, Day Treatment & Intensive Outpatient, Care Management when Transitioning from treatment to the community, and Prevention Services. This group will resume in the Spring of 2024 to develop an action plan.

Priority 3- Substance Use Disorder

Union County expanded the community distribution efforts to agencies and organizations for their service operations and to expand further distribution to community residents requesting naloxone kits. In 2023, Union County staff distributed 1,954 naloxone kits to 40 different community providers as well as to Union County Government staff and Union County residents.

At the Union County Board of County Commissioners (BOCC) 11/20/23 meeting, the BOCC approved the Human Services Campus Tobacco Use Ordinance, effective February 1, 2024. It meets requirements set by the NC Medicaid Division of Health Benefits and the NC Local Public Health Accreditation Program. It aims to not only adhere to these requirements but also create a healthier, tobacco-free environment for both employees and visitors of Union County Human Services.

<https://www.unioncountync.gov/Home/Components/News/News/1264/14>

Union County received a total of \$17,141,415 in Opioid Settlement Funds. In June 2023, the BOCC approved a total of \$2,524,783 in funding allocations over the next three years to *Bridge to Recovery*, *Cameron's House of Hope*, *Ground 40*, *New Beginnings*, *Union County Human Services Naloxone Distribution*, and *Wingate University*. Wingate is monitoring and evaluating the UC Opioid Settlement Strategies, supporting a data dashboard, and disseminating reports. Over the last six months, Wingate University staff worked with Union County Human Services staff to develop logic models and evaluation metrics for the service providers that received funding.

Morbidity and Mortality Changes Since Last CHA

	Health Indicator	Report Period	Union County (UC)	UC Trending from CHA	North Carolina	
Maternal, Child & Infant Health	Infant Mortality (<1yr) (rate/1000 live births)	2017-2021	4.1	↓	6.9	
	Fetal Deaths (per 1,000 deliveries)	2017-2021	7.1	↑	6.4	
	Neonatal Deaths (<28 days) (per 1,000 live births)	2017-2021	2.8	↓	4.6	
	Post Neo-Natal Deaths (28 days-1 year) (per 1,000 live births)	2017-2021	1.3	↓	2.3	
	Live Births (rate per 1,000 population)	2017-2021	10	↓	11.4	
	Low Birth Weight (<=2500 g) (% of all live births)	2017-2021	7.7	↑	9.4	
	Teen Pregnancy Rate (15-19 years) (per 1,000 females)	2017-2021	10	↓	22.1	
	% Interval of <6 Months (between delivery & conception)	2017-2021	12.6	↑	13.1	
	Unmarried Mothers (% of all live births)	2017-2021	30	↓	41.2	
Chronic Conditions (Mortality) (age-adjusted rate per 100,000 population)	Heart Disease	2017-2021	132.2	↑	161.1	
	Cancers – All Sites	2017-2021	145.4	↑	154.5	
	Trachea, Bronchus & Lung	2017-2021	33.7	↓	38.8	
	Breast	2017-2021	20.3	↑	20.3	
	Colon, Rectum & Anus	2017-2021	10.9	↓	12.9	
	Prostate	2017-2021	19.2	↓	19.7	
	Cerebrovascular Disease (Stroke)	2017-2021	39.3	↑	44	
	Chronic Lower Respiratory Disease	2017-2021	31.6	↓	41.4	
	Alzheimer’s Disease	2017-2021	58.3	↑	38	
	Pneumonia & Influenza	2017-2021	13.8	↓	15.1	
	Diabetes Mellitus	2017-2021	19.7	↑	26.1	
	Septicemia	2017-2021	13.5	↓	12.6	
	Nephritis, Nephrotic Syndrome & Nephrosis	2017-2021	18.2	↑	16.8	
	Chronic Liver Disease & Cirrhosis	2017-2021	7.4	↓	12	
	Motor Vehicle Injuries	2017-2021	11.4	↓	15.7	
	Injury (Mortality) (Rate per 100,000 population)	All Other Unintentional Injuries	2017-2021	33.4	↑	48.5
		Suicide	2017-2021	9	↓	13.5
Homicide		2017-2021	3.9	↑	7.8	
Communicable Diseases (Rate per 100,000 population) Data collected by NC EDSS Surveillance	COVID-19 (age-adjusted mortality rate)	2017-2021	35.4		34.6	
	Chlamydia	2022	395.7	↓	612.8	
	Gonorrhea	2022	124.4	↑	254.6	

	Health Indicator	Report Period	Union County (UC)	UC Trending from CHA	North Carolina
Communicable Diseases (Rate per 100,000 population) Data collected by NC EDSS Surveillance	AIDS (age-adjusted mortality rate)	2020-2022	*	← →	1.6
	Newly Diagnosed AIDS Average Rates	2020-2022	2.8	↑	6.2
	Newly Diagnosed HIV Average Rates	2020-2022	5.6	↑	14.4
	Newly Diagnosed Early Syphilis Average Rate	2020-2022	14.7	↑	30.5
	Tuberculosis	2022	1.2	↑	1.5

Source: North Carolina State Center for Health Statistics

- Alzheimer’s Disease mortality rates in Union County continue to increase annually, along with national trends. More than 6 million Americans of all ages are currently living with Alzheimer’s as Americans are living longer. It is one of the top leading causes of death among Americans aged 65 and older.
- The case rate for Gonorrhea, Syphilis, and Tuberculosis all increased over the last year. Increased outreach efforts, a fast track STI clinic, and rapid HIV field testing were put in place to address this concern.
- Heart Disease is the second leading cause of death in Union County. Over the last ten years, the heart disease mortality rate has declined. There was a slight uptick during this reporting period.
- The percentage of overdose deaths involving illicit opioids decreased from 86.3% in 2021 to 76.1% in 2022.
- The infant mortality disparity ratio trended upward during this reporting period from 3.41 to 4.82. African American residents are 4.82 times more likely to experience an infant death than White residents.

New/Paused/Discontinued Initiatives Since Last CHA

New Initiatives

Union County Public Health Division FY2023

MEDICAID TRANSFORMATION

As part of Medicaid transformation, the Care Management for At-Risk Children (CMARC) program began transferring members to Tailored Plans where appropriate. This has proven to be an involved process requiring multiple emails and phone calls for each transfer. Union County staff provides a warm handoff for each client being transferred.

RABIES CLINICS

In November of 2023, Union County Public Health led a prevention and pre-exposure campaign to vaccinate residents against rabies infection. Union County has cattle producers, taxidermists, animal rescue workers, and veterinary clinic workers who are at risk for rabies exposure due to their work responsibilities. Union County leveraged available state funding to offer an additional layer of protection to these residents through pre-exposure rabies vaccination. In conjunction with this initiative, veterinary offices in the county were enrolled in our GovDelivery communication system to promote ongoing communication with these agencies who impact animal and public health.

Union County held four low-cost animal rabies vaccination clinics in the Spring and Fall of 2023. To promote the health of animals in the county, Union County’s veterinarian, Animal Services, Friends of the Shelter and Community Support and Outreach partnered to provide this service for residents. The low-cost vaccine encourages pet owners who might not typically seek routine veterinary care to protect their animals. A total of 659 domestic animals were vaccinated and 84 microchipped in a drive-through set up at the Union County Human Services Agency.

RACIAL & ETHNIC APPROACHES TO COMMUNITY HEALTH (REACH) PROGRAM GRANT FUNDING

Union County Human Services Agency, along with Catawba County, Gaston County, Mecklenburg County, and Rowan County, were approached in January 2023 by Cabarrus Health Alliance (CHA) regarding our interest in participating in a regional grant initiative in which they were applying. CHA will provide leadership and maintain fiduciary responsibilities associated with the REACH program’s grant funding. The purpose of this 5-year REACH program is to improve health, prevent chronic disease (i.e., hypertension, heart disease, type 2 diabetes, and obesity), and reduce health disparities in local communities. The grant strategies include food and nutrition security through the promotion of food service and nutrition guidelines and the expansion of existing fruit and vegetable vouchers incentive, safe and accessible physical

activity, tobacco prevention and control policies, and to increase access to Adult Immunizations to support the prevention of infectious diseases such as flu and pneumonia. Since these are shared goals of our Human Services Agency and consistent with our current work efforts in Union County, it seemed advantageous for us to be a partner county in the regional initiative and gain the benefit of the available funding if the grant is awarded. In year one, which started 9/30/23, the funding will go towards funding current staff time conducting prevention activities, training and education efforts, marketing and communication, and operational expenses such as meetings and outreach events.

Union County partnered with Reach Out and Read, a national early literacy program, to improve our families' ability to make reading an everyday practice. Launching in the late spring of 2023, Union's Child Health clinic began providing a new book to each child between birth and six years during his or her wellness visit. The provided books are age-appropriate and available in English and Spanish to best serve our population. This program supports healthy childhood development and increased family bonding. This year, 278 books were received by our Child Health families.

STI SCREENING AND OUTREACH

In 2023, STI expanded screening testing for male patients to include no charge for chlamydia urine NAAT testing. This is important since chlamydia infections are often asymptomatic and are easily spread. No cost-screening reduces a direct barrier to testing for our clients. In turn, early identification and treatment of infections can positively impact the rates of chlamydia in our county.

STI outreach expansion efforts to community residents with rapid HIV testing were begun in 2023. Our lab received authorization to perform off-site testing that provides results in 20 minutes. Rapid HIV testing was offered at several health fairs and at multiple pop-up sites located in areas of high social vulnerability. Providing this service on our mobile outreach unit in the community helps to normalize STI testing and destigmatize HIV.

Preliminary surveillance was conducted to determine the desire for additional STI screening capacity at Union County Division of Public Health. Plans are underway to add Fast-Track screening services at the beginning of 2024.

UPDATED TOBACCO CURRICULUM IMPLEMENTED IN UNION COUNTY PUBLIC SCHOOLS

The Union County Public School (UCPS) Curriculum Committee approved using the *You and Me, Together Vape-Free* curriculum, which is part of the Stanford Tobacco

Prevention Toolkit, in UCPS 6 grade and 9 grade health class. The *You and Me, Together Vape-Free* curriculum is a 6-lessons evidence-based curriculum created by Stanford REACH Lab. Every lesson provides activities, online quiz games, and worksheets in addition to presentations, resources, and other materials aimed at addressing key factors associated with youth e-cigarette use, including changing adolescents' attitudes towards and misperceptions about e-cigarettes; increasing their refusal skills to pulls of flavors, marketing, and social media; reducing stress and depression which have been linked to e-cigarette initiation and use; improving coping; and decreasing intentions and actual use of all e-cigarette products.

VACCINATION EFFORTS

Union County participated in the CDC's Bridge Access Program to provide no-cost COVID-19 vaccines to adults without health insurance, along with providing VFC COVID-19 vaccinations to children. These are effective tools to eliminate at least one barrier to receiving vaccination protection.

Respiratory Syncytial Virus (RSV) is a common cause of respiratory infection in children less than one year of age, and infected infants can have serious illnesses requiring hospitalization. RSV infections coincide with annual surges of infections caused by influenza, and more recently, COVID-19. To protect the most vulnerable, Union County began offering the preventive antibody and vaccine to children under one year of age at the end of 2023. As therapies are more widely available, pregnant women will also be offered the opportunity to be vaccinated, which provides passive immunity to their unborn infant.

Union County Environmental Health Division FY2023

CLEAN CLASSROOMS FOR CAROLINA KIDS PROGRAM

In 2023, The Clean Water for Carolina Kids™ program expanded to become the [Clean Classrooms for Carolina Kids™](#) program to identify and eliminate lead and asbestos hazards where North Carolina children learn and play. This is a legislatively mandated effort to address lead and asbestos hazards in North Carolina public schools, licensed childcare centers, and licensed family childcare homes. Participation allows facilities to meet all rule requirements for identified lead and asbestos hazards, as required by law. A news release from the NC Department of Public Instruction about the program can be found here:

<https://www.dpi.nc.gov/news/pressreleases/2023/09/13/clean-classrooms-carolina-kids-program-launches-address-lead-and-asbestos-hazards-public-schools-and> →

Facility participation in this program is FREE thanks to funding from the state of North Carolina and Federal government. The Clean Classrooms for Carolina Kids™ program is a partnership between RTI International, a nonprofit research institute, and the North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services (NC DHHS), with the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (NCDPI) as a liaison.

Union County Public Health is eligible to receive ARPA-related funds for performing specific program responsibilities such as postmitigation water sampling, visual assessments of lead-based paint hazards, lead-related consultations, and date entry. Assistance related to asbestos will be handled by NC DHHS staff in the Epidemiology and Health Hazards Control Unit Sections of Public Health.

BASELINE WELL WATER SAMPLING FOR PFAS

On March 14, 2023, the EPA proposed new drinking water regulations for 6 per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances (PFAS). The National Primary Drinking Water Regulations are legally enforceable primary standards and treatment techniques that apply to public water systems. The proposed Maximum Contaminant Level (MCL) reflects the level that protects human health and that water systems can achieve using the best available technology.

Union County Environmental Health is proactively monitoring this issue and is conducting baseline well water sampling for PFAS to determine levels in groundwater. Owners of private drinking water wells can contact the Environmental Health Division for information on water testing and treatment options. Additionally, Union County Public Water is performing ongoing testing for PFAS. Results and other helpful information are posted on the [Union County Water emerging contaminants webpage](#).

Paused and Discontinued Initiatives

COVID REPORTING

Covid is no longer a reportable condition with the resolution of the public health emergency although outbreaks and clusters continue to be investigated. Isolation recommendations for the public and healthcare providers were relaxed.

ON-SITE WASTEWATER DISPOSAL (SEPTIC) SYSTEM REPAIR PROGRAM

In August 2023, the Septic System Repair Program, funded with Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) resources, was paused.

The administration of the program, including determination of program eligibility, was reorganized, and moved in-house to be coordinated by a Union County Grants Manager.

Approximately 35% of Union County residents utilize OSWW systems to treat the wastewater generated in their homes and businesses. System age, poor maintenance, and complex soil and site conditions contribute to the increasing number of malfunctioning OSWW systems. Addressing these failing systems and their associated public health risks requires an elevated response from Environmental Health including soil/site assessments, permit issuance and, in some cases, legal enforcement actions. With escalating repair costs and limited public sewer accessibility, this trend will continue. It is our intention to re-activate this program to address the urgent public health concerns related to malfunctioning septic systems in Union County.

Emerging Issues Since Last CHA

- Increasing substance use disorders and behavioral health needs in the general community (depression, suicide, etc.).
- Continuing impact of COVID-19 response on youth educational delays/setbacks and disruption of supportive assistance particularly for high-risk population groups.
- Increasing cases of STIs, especially syphilis and congenital syphilis, while there is a shortage of bicillin.
- Increasing use of vaping products and particularly among youth.
- Impact of Medicaid reform and recent Medicaid expansion on access to care for underserved population groups.
- Impact of lack of Affordable Housing on health outcomes.
- In 2023 both the health department and county childhood vaccine immunizations were below the benchmark, but higher than the statewide average. The addition of children vaccinated against COVID-19 into the health department caseloads has affected benchmark results statewide.
- The Food, Lodging and Institutions Program staff in the Environmental Health Division are observing an increasing number of illegal food vendors in Union County. This issue seems to be exacerbated by the advertisement of food for sale on the internet and social media.
- Recalls related to the contamination of food, spices, cosmetics, and health remedies with heavy metals such as lead, mercury, cadmium, and arsenic are increasing. Many products and ingredients are sourced and/or purchased internationally and FDA testing is limited in comparison to the type (legal authority) and volume of products entering the United States.



UNIONCOUNTY