

Advancing Equity in Rural Eastern North Carolina: Hyde County's Story

PUBLIC HEALTH PROBLEM

Eastern North Carolina is home to a number of extremely rural, isolated, and coastal communities. Hyde County is divided into mainland Hyde and Ocracoke Island (accessible by 3-hour ferry trip). Despite having one of the smallest populations in the state, geographically Hyde is one of the largest counties in the state, replete with forests, farmland, and multiple bodies of water (1). Yet despite the abundance of farmland and fishermen, the whole county is considered a food desert.

Hyde County is an economically disadvantaged county, where the unemployment rate in December 2021 was nearly double that of the state, with the state's 3rd highest unemployment rate (2), and a poverty rate 49% higher than the state average (1). Poverty is one of the surest predictors of poor health outcomes, a risk that is exacerbated when people in poverty do not have health insurance, which is currently the case for approximately 17.5% of Hyde County's population, about 41% higher than the state uninsured rate (1).

In Hyde County, pursuing and achieving health equity requires an intentional and continual process in which policies, practices, and systems are analyzed and improved over time to support measurable change in the lives of historically marginalized populations (HMPs). This analysis began with the 2021 Hyde County Community Health Assessment (CHA), which yielded a health prioritization process that identified the top leading priorities as Substance Use, Mental Health, and Child Abuse/Neglect. "Quality of Life" issues were ranked by Hyde County residents as well, revealing "Low Income/poverty," "Drugs/alcohol," and "Lack of community resources" as their primary concerns (3). This initial analysis of the geographic, demographic, and socioeconomic landscape led the Hyde County Health Department to prioritize tackling systemic inequities in their community, starting with their health department, through a series of small steps that show promise in leading to systemic change.

TAKING ACTION

To more effectively address these county priorities, the Hyde County Health Department (HCHD) accepted funding from the North Carolina Division of Public Health, through the CDC's "National Initiative to Address COVID-19 Health Disparities Among Populations at High-Risk and Underserved, Including Racial and Ethnic Minority Populations and Rural Communities" grant. The initial goal for the program included forming an Internal Equity Workgroup (IEW) of the health department to examine HCHD's policies and practices through an equity lens. The IEW was comprised of six staff members from various divisions, including administration, health education, clinical, etc. The IEW first completed an Organizational Equity Assessment, revealing agency needs to diversify staff training options to serve all populations more equitably, as well as the need to increase efforts to mobilize community groups. Once this assessment was completed, the group worked to create and implement an organizational equity plan informed by and intended to address community needs. The goals included:

- Goal 1 - By June 2023, diversify and increase training options for HCHD staff by providing enhanced training on health equity/cultural competence to HCHD staff; incorporating diversity, equity, and inclusion measures into HCHD's Orientation & Staff Development Policy; and providing a training to better equip our staff to work with Deaf/Hard of Hearing populations.
- Goal 2 - By Summer 2023, hear and learn from diverse perspectives in the community by forming an Equity Advisory Council that meets quarterly, as well as distributing a Community Input Survey containing equity-focused measures.

To address the plan and the need to build staff capacity to address equity, HCHD began by strengthening staff training requirements by instituting mandatory training for staff to serve Deaf/Hard of Hearing, and Deaf/Blind patients and clients more effectively. This training was selected because of discussions within our IEW, as it was clear that there were many populations the health department needed to serve more equitably, particularly those with disabilities.

In addition to ensuring that HCHD was effectively addressing the needs of the community, a community-based Equity Advisory Council (EAC) was formed to ensure that those with lived experience were informing public health decision-making. The EAC initially met in June 2022 using the first several months to create detailed operating procedures and a strategic plan to guide its work. The EAC now meets monthly and is comprised of community leaders from various HMP groups, with representation from African American, Hispanic, LGBTQ+, disabled, veteran, elderly, and other communities. The EAC also ensures that professional representation is included, with direct links to the school system, health department, county government, and several local nonprofits, as well as representation from hard-to-reach parts of the county, including Ocracoke Island.

IMPACT

As a result of instituting HCHD's IEW and required staff training, the agency ultimately changed its practices for serving people with disabilities in a more equitable way, first by incorporating new signage in the health department (in Spanish and Braille) as well as adopting new strategies and tools to better accommodate deaf/blind patients, including the use of a tablet with our deaf patients and a "pocket talker" device for hard of hearing patients. HCHD also demonstrated its commitment to addressing equity by creating a new position that will serve as the agency's Equity Coordinator with the intention of advancing equity well after the grant funding ends. While this position receives some funding support from the NC Department of Health and Human Services, Division of Public Health's Healthy Communities Program funded by CDC's Preventive Health and Health Services Block Grant, the position also benefits from local support as the county agreed to designate funds to this position, demonstrating the Hyde County Board of Commissioners' and county administration's commitment to this work.

In addition to the changes that will have long-lasting impact on the organization and the patients it serves, the broader community was also positively impacted by the EAC. Several goals set by the EAC have already been accomplished and/or are in the process of being implemented. One such success being a workshop hosted by the EAC free-of-charge to all county residents, highlighting the importance and specifics of estate planning, followed by an afternoon session on grant writing, targeting minority small business owners. This much needed training equipped minority business owners with the skills to secure grant funding for their local businesses.

The EAC worked diligently to guide the HCHD's Community Orchard Project which will enable communities to focus on feeding HMPs in the county who have little to no access to healthy foods. Two sites were created at the HCHD in Swan Quarter and the Volunteer Fire Department in Engelhard in fall 2023, with two more slated for creation in spring 2024, in the townships of Scranton and Fairfield. These orchards will provide Elberta peaches, Kieffer pears, Fuji apples, Gala apples, Celeste figs, and Southern Highbush blueberry bushes. Moreover, blueberry bushes were provided to an existing Community Garden on Ocracoke Island, ensuring that all townships in the county will be served through this project, no matter how hard to reach. Additionally, the HCHD and the EAC are partnering with Hyde County Cooperative Extension for their expertise in local vegetation, as well as Hyde County Schools' Future Farmers of America Program to address maintenance of the county's largest orchard site in Swan Quarter.

While HCHD's initial steps to advance equity may seem small, these steps were made through an equity lens with intentionality. HCHD's efforts to integrate internal introspection and change

around equitable practices is a huge leap toward a future of better serving Hyde County residents from historically marginalized communities.

1 United States Census Bureau: <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/NC.hydecounlynorthcarolina>

2 NC Department of Commerce: <https://files.nc.gov/nccommerce/press-release/files/Dec-2021-county-release-combined.pdf>

3 Data from 2021 CHA: <https://docs.google.com/presentation/d/1caZ8WN7HBaFFjLHGo5abjh64Vr5jKosppiThpJOLo/edit?usp=sharing>