

## What is the Forsyth County Healthy Community Coalition?

The Forsyth County Healthy Community Coalition seeks to improve the quality of life of people in Forsyth County by focusing on long-term, system-level solutions. Coalition members work to implement policies that will make this community a healthier place to live.

Formed in the late nineties, the Healthy Community Coalition is a certified Healthy Carolinians Task Force. Coordination and technical support is provided by the Department of Public Health.

## Why a focus on policy and systems change?

The choices individuals make about their health and behavior are important parts of having a healthy community. Yet, decisions made at broader community levels that support people's health and well-being can impact community health on a much larger scale. The Winston-Salem area is a community rich in services and programs that assist individuals and families in making healthy choices and in having access to health-related resources. The Forsyth County Healthy Community Coalition is working on policy and system level change to support the programs and services offered in Forsyth County. We seek to create an environment that makes healthy choices easier or even possible for all residents of our community.

## History of the Forsyth County Healthy Community Coalition and development of current policy recommendations

The Forsyth County Healthy Community Coalition's Fall 2005 Health Summit offers a number of policy and system change recommendations that have the potential to improve the overall health and well-being of people in our community. These recommendations are the result of a three-year process which is described in detail below. During this process, community volunteers identified critical areas of health need in our community, researched national and statewide system and policy level initiatives that exist to address these challenges, and created a slate of recommendations that have been adapted to local needs and resources.

The Forsyth County Healthy Community Coalition gathered in 2002 by invitation of the Health Director, Dr. Tim Monroe. Attendees were both people that had served on former Forsyth County Healthy Carolinians initiatives as well as new leaders in the community. At that point, the group named itself the Forsyth County Healthy Community Coalition.



A Community Health Assessment committee conducted a yearlong assessment of the health status in the Forsyth County community. The committee was made up of community residents and representatives from several agencies including public health, social services, mental health, sheriff's department, United Way, both hospital systems, local universities, and community colleges.

The committee reviewed primary and secondary data to form an understanding of the pressing health concerns in this community. Committee members then ranked health issues according to magnitude, seriousness of consequences, and possibility of correcting the problem. Based on the results from the ranking process, the top four health problems were chosen as the Priority Areas.

The Community Assessment was completed in July 2003. In addition to preparing an assessment report for the North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services, the Healthy Community Coalition also created a Health Report Card for Forsyth County. The following four priority health areas and two overarching concerns were identified:

#### **Priority Areas**

- Health Behaviors
- Reproductive Health
- Access to Care
- Domestic Violence

#### **Overarching concerns (impacting all priority areas)**

- Racial Disparities
- Mental Health

At the initial Forsyth County Health Summit in 2003, findings from the Community Assessment were presented. The summit also served as the first official debut of the Forsyth County Healthy Community Coalition and the first organized recruitment event. Over 300 Forsyth County residents attended. The theme for the Summit was “Defining Community Health Values.” The afternoon consisted of four breakout sessions, each one focusing on one of the major health concerns identified in the Community Health Assessment. Sessions were facilitated by local physicians, clergy, and community members.

Approximately 150 community members completed volunteer forms to join the Coalition. As a result of



the Health Summit, groups were formed to begin addressing priority health issues identified during the Community Assessment. The broad Coalition and issue-focused groups continued to meet over the next two years.

Based on the interests of Coalition members and those who volunteered at the 2003 Health Summit, the Healthy Community Coalition organized into four groups. Each of these groups then began to further investigate the health issues, to strategize about possible system or policy changes that had the potential to improve the identified health challenges, and to look to other communities and states for examples of successful strategies. The four groups held regular meetings and brainstorming sessions between Fall 2003 and Fall 2005. During this time period, each group developed recommendations for specific, measurable system and policy changes for our community.

## Health Behaviors

Members of this working group are interested in public policy as it relates to nutrition, tobacco, physical activity. Focuses of this working group include tobacco free schools, the built environment, and overweight and obesity. The Lifestyles and Behaviors working group joined efforts with the School Health Advisory Council to pilot a healthy supplemental sales program in several Winston-Salem Forsyth County (WSFC) elementary and middle schools. Additionally, a 100% Tobacco Free Schools (TFS) task force is working on youth tobacco prevention by advocating for a 100% TFS policy in the WSFC schools.

## Domestic Violence

This working group focuses on a number of issues such as violence in the home (including sexual, emotional, and physical abuse), dating violence, and the criminal justice response to domestic violence. Two local agencies are taking the lead in addressing this issue: Family Services in collaboration with the Domestic Violence Community Council and Winston Salem State University Center for Community Safety. The Domestic Violence Community Council develops and nurtures a coordinated community response to the issue and to identify gaps in services for victims. The Center for Community Safety helps shape the way local communities respond to violence and has been recognized both locally and nationally as a leader in sustaining and leveraging community-based initiatives, developing innovative projects, and as a training center for communities in strategic justice planning. This working group is coordinating efforts to reduce domestic violence through education and improving options that will allow victims to leave their abusers.

## Racial Disparities

This working group addresses challenges and problems created from racism and poverty. Focus areas include: the association of neighborhood characteristics and health disparities; empowering minority population through voters' registration drives that impact voter turn out and future public policies; and a living minimum wage policy to raise income and improve overall health and economic development in minority neighborhoods in our community. The group also suggests that a health advisory body work with the City-County Planning Board to ensure that development in minority neighborhoods positively impacts the health of community residents.

## Reproductive Health

The members of this working group are concerned about many reproductive health issues such as Forsyth County's high rates of sexually transmitted diseases, unplanned pregnancies, and infant deaths. This team joined with volunteers from the Forsyth County Infant Mortality Reduction Coalition, a local group dedicated to reducing infant mortality by educating the community and advocating for systems and policy changes that support healthy births. After much discussion, the reproductive health working group decided to focus on system changes that will help families plan their pregnancies.



In the following section, policy recommendations are presented from each group. Some groups have recommended several desired changes that will improve the quality of life in the Forsyth County community.