



# Office of Minority Health & Health Disparities

## NC Minority Health Advisory Council Meeting Minutes Tuesday, December 16, 2025, at 10:00 a.m.

The quarterly scheduled meeting of the North Carolina Minority Health Advisory Council (MHAC) was called to order on Wednesday, Tuesday, December 16, 2025, at 10:00 a.m. virtually on Microsoft Teams with Portia Pope, Director, NCDHHS (North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services) Office of Minority Health and Health Disparities, presiding. The following people were in attendance for the meeting:

Attendee	Present on December 16, 2025, Meeting
<b>MHAC Members</b>	
Dr. Gary R. Gunderson	
Dr. Gabriela Marie Plascencia	X
Dr. Cherry Maynor Beasley	X
Dr. Ronny A. Bell	
Dr. Natasha Adams-Denny	
Dr. Lawrence R. Wu	X
The Honorable Donna M. White	
The Honorable Carla D. Cunningham	X
Dr. Chere M. Gregory	
The Honorable Donyel Barber	
Dr. Catherine Evans	X
The Honorable Gladys A. Robinson	
Ms. Brenda J. Smith	
Dr. Olugbemiga E. Jegede	X
Vacant	
<b>Guests</b>	
Paige Wyrick supporting Dr. Chere Gregory	X
Brittany Woods-Holmes supporting Dr. Chere Gregory	X
Zuri Konegay supporting the Honorable Gladys A. Robinson	X
<b>NCDHHS Meeting Speakers and Facilitators</b>	
Debra Farrington, Deputy Secretary, NCDHHS Health Portfolio	X



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Attendee	Present on December 16, 2025, Meeting
Dr. Portia Pope, Director, NCDHHS OMHHD	X
Florida Ahado, Data and Evaluation Program Manager, NCDHHS OMHHD	X
DeNita Nash, Human Services Program Manager, NCDHHS OMHHD	X
LaQuana Palmer, Deputy Director, Communications and Engagement, NCDHHS Division of Health Benefits (NC Medicaid)	X
Tatiana Moore, Minority Diabetes Prevention Program (MDPP) Program Manager, NCDHHS OMHHD	X
<b>NCDHHS OMHHD Guests (if any)</b>	
Willysha Jenkins, Chief of Staff, NCDHHS Health Portfolio	X

## Meeting Notes

### I. Preliminary Matters

- (1) Director Portia Pope opened the meeting, introduced herself and welcomed the assembled virtual audience and members to the December 2025 MHAC meeting.
- (2) Florida Ahado conducted a roll call for MHAC members and asked any guests or other partners to put their names and affiliations in the chat.
- (3) Director Pope presented on communication equity considerations for the meeting, meeting objectives, and introduced the NC DHHS Office of Minority Health and Health Disparities mission, objectives and values to the council.
- (4) Debra Farrington, Deputy Secretary of Health Portfolio, gave an update on the Rural Health Transformation Application, Goals, and Initiatives.
- (5) LaQuana Palmer, Deputy Director of Communications and Engagement Division of Health Benefits, gave an update on NC Medicaid, MAC/BAC, etc.....



### II. Presentation Content

- (1) Deputy Secretary Debra Farrington provided an overview of the Rural Health Transformation Application; a five-year federal funding opportunity focusing on strengthening rural health systems across North Carolina. She emphasized the application's focus on innovation, technology, and sustainability to support rural providers, particularly in light of hospital closures and challenges in serving uninsured and Medicaid populations. Deputy Secretary Farrington explained that the funding would support initiatives including workforce development, access to care, behavioral health, and technology adoption, and noted that the application was informed by input from more than 420 stakeholders across the state.
- (2) Deputy Director LaQuana Palmer provided updates on NC Medicaid, including the enrollment of an additional 700,000 individuals from 2023 to October 2025 through Medicaid expansion plan, the launch of tailored plans, and the establishment of the Medicaid Advisory Committee and Beneficiary Advisory Council to incorporate direct beneficiary input into policy decisions. She also noted the Medical Debt Relief Program, which has assisted approximately 2 million individuals with \$6 billion in medical debt, Medicaid's uninterrupted response to Hurricane Helene, and the Connecting Communities initiative to engage community organizations in feedback and communications. She highlighted upcoming initiatives supporting providers with substance use education and cell and gene therapy for individuals with sickle cell disease, emphasizing continued efforts to reach and serve communities and beneficiaries.
- (3) Dr. Portia Pope provided updates from the Office of Minority Health and Health Disparities, highlighting ongoing efforts to address chronic disease, health disparities, and cross-divisional initiatives. She noted collaboration with Medicaid on communication and engagement, media attention for the Minority Diabetes Prevention Program, and the development of fact sheets and toolkits to inform communities about disparities and prevention strategies. Dr. Pope discussed programs targeting health outcomes across the lifespan, including a learning collaborative on brain diseases and partnerships with other departments within NCDHHS to support Brain Health initiatives. She emphasized the use of data and community input to guide interventions and track long-term outcomes, noting that the Office of Minority Health and Health Disparities has engaged over 40,000 individuals across the state since January 2025.
- (4) Denita Nash, Human Services Program Manager, OMHHD, provided an update on the NC Minority Diabetes Prevention Program (NC MDPP), speaking on behalf of Tatiana Moore. She reviewed the program's reach since 2017, noting that Region 8 previously screened 1,527 individuals for prediabetes, enrolled 304 participants, and conducted 23 lifestyle class series before services were discontinued in FY 2021 due to underperformance. Nash highlighted that the need in Region 8 remains high, particularly given elevated diabetes prevalence and mortality rates in counties such as Sampson, Robeson, Columbus, and Bladen, as well as among American Indian populations, including members of the Lumbee, Waccamaw, and Coharie tribes. She emphasized that these disparities reflect broader social determinants of health, including access to care, income, and living conditions. Nash noted



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that expansion into Region 8 would require additional resources, as existing regions are already operating at full capacity, and requested guidance from the MHAC on strategies to sustainably address the unmet needs in this high-risk region.

### **III. Discussion / Open Floor**

- (1) Dr. Gabriela Marie Plascencia stressed the value of prevention programs, noting that while they have upfront costs, they are far less expensive than long-term care for complications from chronic conditions such as diabetes. She advocated for allocating resources toward preventive care, highlighting research showing that interventions in nutrition and physical activity can reduce long-term chronic disease and associated costs.
- (2) Dr. Evans highlighted the importance of oral health and early interventions in children, noting that addressing oral care is a key component of overall wellness and prevention.
- (3) Paige Wyrick shared that existing programs could help expand reach in underserved areas, and follow-up coordination with the Minority Diabetes Prevention Program team was planned to implement tactical, on-the-ground strategies addressing identified disparities.
- (4) Dr. Cherry Maynor Beasley highlighted the rising death rates in Region 8, particularly among certain client populations, and shared that her office has partnered with Robeson County to secure a grant focused on diabetes and obesity. She emphasized the importance of community-level engagement and expressed willingness to collaborate in person, including site visits to Pembroke, to support local health initiatives.

### **IV. Closing Matters**

- (1) Closing remarks from Director Pope on OMHHD contact information, resources, and the post-session survey.

### **V. Next Steps and Action Items**

- (1) Director Pope and Denita Nash will connect with Dr. Cherry Beasley in January 2026 about NC MDPP in Region 8, fielding requests from Robeson County and ensuring more targeted collaboration among groups addressing health disparities in North Carolina.



NC DEPARTMENT OF  
**HEALTH AND  
HUMAN SERVICES**  
Office of Minority Health  
and Health Disparities

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