

Public Participation Plan

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NC DEPARTMENT OF
**HEALTH AND
HUMAN SERVICES**

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Introduction

The North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services (NCDHHS) manages the delivery of health- and human-related services for all North Carolinians, especially the state's most vulnerable residents: children, elderly, disabled and low-income families. Led by the Secretary of Health and Human Services, the department is divided into 33 divisions and offices under six broad service areas: Health, Opportunity and Well-Being; Medicaid; Operational Excellence; Policy and Communications; and Health Equity. NCDHHS also oversees 14 state-operated healthcare facilities: developmental centers, neuro-medical treatment centers, psychiatric hospitals, alcohol and drug abuse treatment centers, and two residential programs for children.

NCDHHS works closely with health care professionals, community leaders and advocacy groups; local, tribal, state and federal entities; and many other stakeholders to make this happen. In collaboration with these partners, the department is advancing its mission to improve the health, safety and well-being of all people in the state. Its commitment to equity in providing these services is outlined in its [2021-2023 Strategic Plan](#) and reflected in its [Mission, Vision and Values](#).

Purpose of the Public Participation Plan

NCDHHS recognizes that all North Carolinians have the right to access government services, to meaningfully contribute to government decisions, and to share equitably in the benefits of a prosperous North Carolina. To engage its residents, NCDHHS operates a comprehensive communications and media program focused on raising awareness and building relationships within the communities it serves. However, the department acknowledges that there is more that it can do to reach communities across the state that may be unaware of and underserved by its programs. This includes communities of color, indigenous communities, rural communities and low- and moderate-income communities. Consequently, it is necessary for these communities to be more meaningfully engaged as partners and stakeholders in government decision-making.

The aim of the Public Participation Plan is to improve communication, create meaningful dialogue, and enhance transparency in decision-making with the public. This plan provides a framework from which to guide the public participation process of health and well-being initiatives at NCDHHS. It establishes a model for effective public involvement and shares best practices for increasing attendance by raising awareness, removing barriers and engaging new audiences. It also highlights the need for ongoing training and evaluation to improve the agency's efforts.

Inclusive outreach and public engagement are critical for NCDHHS to be successful in meeting its mission. To this end, the initial NCDHHS Public Access and Participation Plan includes the commitment to:

- Increase agency staff awareness and sensitivity to the value of incorporating the perspectives of underserved populations – especially from communities that traditionally have been overlooked – in agency activities and decision-making, through internal training.
- Develop staff facilitation capacity to improve meaningful public participation in agency public meetings.
- Develop staff capacity to represent the agency to the public and be responsive to people who contact our agency seeking help.
- Revisit and redesign the ways that the public accesses the agency to increase transparency and better enable meaningful participation.
- Adopt means of measuring success in public access and participation.
- Incorporate lessons learned through public engagement to ensure continuous improvement in these efforts.

Identifying Stakeholders

A key step in implementing a public participation plan is identifying the people who should be involved. Stakeholders are people who have a direct interest in an issue and can positively or negatively influence its outcome. Their role in the process should be clear and expectations about their participation easy to articulate. Healthcare providers, legislators, community-based organizations, individuals and families are some of NCDHHS' frequent stakeholders.

Historically Marginalized Populations

A subset of the general public, historically marginalized populations are individuals, groups and communities that have historically and systematically been denied access to services, resources and power relationships across economic, political, and cultural dimensions as a result of systemic, durable and persistent racism, discrimination and other forms of oppression. Long standing and well-documented structural marginalization has resulted in poor outcomes – health, social, political, economic and overall increased vulnerability to harm. They are often identified based on their race, ethnicity, social-economic status, geography, religion, language, sexual identity and disability status.

Limited English Proficiency

Individuals who do not speak English as their primary language and who have limited ability to read, speak, write or understand English can be limited English proficient, or LEP. NCDHHS must take reasonable steps to ensure that people with Limited English Proficiency have meaningful access to the programs, services, and information it provides. These individuals may need language assistance such as interpretation services. Divisions within NCDHHS that receive assistance from the federal government through Title VI of the 1964 Civil Rights Act or Executive Order 13166 must ensure that LEP individuals receive language assistance with respect to a particular type of service, benefit or encounter.

Public Meetings And Outreach



Public meetings are central to the public's access to agency decision makers, and its understanding of agency plans and actions. They can be an effective way to share basic information and get reactions from large groups. They provide an opportunity for agencies to engage communities whose opinions, for many reasons, may not be heard outside of a formal process. NCDHHS relies on the exchange of information to provide a comprehensive view of its programs and initiatives and get a sense of community reaction to potential challenges and benefits of its plans and actions.

To improve public meetings and events, NCDHHS should:

- Review existing practices governing its public meetings, and where appropriate, adopt new practices to promote greater access and meaningful public engagement.
- Engage in community outreach to inform this work.
- Collaborate with community organizations, health and human services partners, and other local, tribal, state and federal agencies.
- Adopt the goal of ongoing improvement to public access and meeting participation.

Town Hall/Information Sessions

Information sessions may be held to raise awareness of a public health issue, department program or statewide initiative. They may take the form of a presentation, workshop or panel discussion and allow the public to receive in-depth information from public health leaders, staff or other experts. Depending on the format, participants may have an opportunity to ask questions or speak one-on-one with someone about their concerns.

Listening Sessions

Listening sessions are an opportunity for agencies to engage communities by listening to their opinions and insights on various topics. The reason to conduct listening sessions is to encourage participants, whose opinions may be missing from the overall understanding of the topic, to discuss what they know and how they feel before the initiative moves forward. Convening listening sessions can uncover challenges and benefits for the department and community to consider. In a context where communities have historically been unable to share their opinions, listening sessions are a useful tool to build trust, maintain relationships and incorporate fresh insights into decision-making.

Public Hearings

Public hearings are designed as a two-way process where members of the public give and receive information associated with decisions the agency is considering. DHHS relies on the exchange of information at public hearings to provide a comprehensive view of agency proposals and uncover the community's views about its anticipated action. Public hearings are not intended to be confrontational or an intimidating process, but rather to aid in informed decision making.

Best Practices for Meetings

When planning public meetings, DHHS staff should examine meeting elements to identify and remove potential barriers to participation.

Timing

Staff should explore the benefits of holding informal public meetings and outreach events at different hours of the day and days of the week to garner wider representative participation. Community and cultural awareness are important considerations when setting a meeting as conflicts with religious, ethnic and civic events may affect attendance. The needs of participants during the event's timeframe should also be incorporated into the planning, such as food and childcare.

Notice

When providing notice, staff should ensure it not only meets statutory or regulatory minimum requirements for meetings but include activities that expand its reach to a wider population. This may include sending direct mail to addresses in a targeted area; posting flyers or signs in community gathering places, such as libraries and parks; requesting that partner agencies and organizations share information within their networks; and utilizing stakeholder contact lists to provide a personal invitation to meetings and events. The public should receive notice at each step of an initiative and be provided instructions on how to participate at each stage.

Publicity

NCDHHS publicizes public opportunities for participation liberally using various media to promote high levels of attendance. Digital media is one of the primary tools the department uses to communicate with the public. This includes the use of its website, video sharing, email lists, social media accounts and digital advertising. It also routinely expands its publicity plan to include more traditional methods such as print media, radio, television, direct mail, telephone campaigns, public displays, bulletin boards and word of mouth, and attending events. The addition of traditional methods often brings greater equity and public participation. The type of publicity that is implemented should be informed by data and designed using input from affected stakeholders and external partners.

The department's Office of Communications oversees its robust media relations program to maintain positive relationships with news agencies and facilitate earned media through press releases, interviews and other interactions. NCDHHS partners with the media to reach people throughout the state and ensure public awareness of the state's health and wellness initiatives. The office also oversees paid media opportunities for the agency and assists staff in the development of engagement plans and materials.

Outreach Partners

The department's success in reaching its outreach goals is directly tied to the relationships it maintains with community organizations, advocacy groups, and other health leaders who possess their own networks to help spread the word. Staff should explore existing resources and engage trusted leaders at the beginning of the planning process to maximize the benefit of these relationships. External intermediaries may also be able to assist with reducing barriers to participation such as the need for childcare and transportation.

Venues

In addition to providing virtual meeting locations, NCDHHS should consider a variety of physical locations, including neighborhoods whose populations are predominantly black, Hispanic/Latino, or indigenous; communities made up primarily of people who have an average income below the state's average; and people living in rural areas across the state. Staff should seek out venues that are accessible to people with disabilities, able to be reached by alternative transportation options and provide basic amenities.

Languages

To remove barriers to participation, NCDHHS should seek to provide translation in American Sign Language and the top spoken language(s) of a community, as determined by the most recent census and/or community data.

Additional Incentives

To motivate attendance and reach new audiences, staff should consider guest speakers, promotional items or other incentives that reflect the unique makeup and interests of their stakeholders. Similar to outreach partners, NCDHHS can benefit by associating its messages with existing traditions, values and images that align with its goals.

Non-Technical Information

Staff should provide relevant information and data to the public in a way that is non-technical and easy for the audience to understand.

Varied Means of Input

The department should provide multiple ways for the public to offer input, including in-person and virtual meetings, telephone, text messaging, email, online comment portals, surveys, polls, and other means.

Utilizing the NCDHHS Website

The department's website provides information about NCDHHS programs, meetings and initiatives. The website is designed with a focus on user experience to optimize engagement and improve the public's understanding of its goals and activities.

To maintain NCDHHS' digital resources, the department will:

- Review web pages and, where necessary, update content with clear, plain-language statements,
- Utilize learning from community outreach to guide this work.
- Provide contact information or comment forms to aid the public in submitting input.
- Ensure websites are accessible so they are able to be used by as many people as possible, keeping in mind individuals with disabilities, bandwidth limitations and different types of digital devices.
- Rely on the assistance and expertise of website specialists to meet public expectations and understand best practices.

Notifications of public input opportunities are posted to the website. The public can sign up to receive newsletters and press releases on the website at www.ncdhhs.gov/news.

Social Media

NCDHHS maintains an active presence on social media to connect with North Carolinians on platforms they may prefer. The agency's social media accounts are listed on the website at www.ncdhhs.gov/follow-ncdhhs-social-media. Notification of meetings, events and opportunities for public input are routinely posted and pushed to followers of these accounts. The public is encouraged to provide feedback on posts about programs and initiatives on the forum, which is monitored by staff. They may also send private messages to ask questions or provide input.



Staff Training

Whether preparing for a listening session or other opportunity for public participation, NCDHHS staff will observe the following guidelines:

- Ensure open meeting laws are followed, including providing adequate notice.
- Establish the purpose of the meeting and consider how the topic is meaningful for participants.
- Keep the format simple and focused on its primary goal.
- Be transparent by explaining what can and cannot be done by the agency.
- Clearly state the objective of their work, e.g., the change the agency is trying to create.
- Focus on direct impacts to attendees.
- Assume good intent, promote civil discourse, and listen with empathy, allowing participants to share their experience without judgment or interruption.
- Be clear about what will be done with the information that is gathered.

Online Training

NCDHHS provides staff with access to an online learning center that offers training on a wide variety of subjects, including meeting facilitation and communication best practices. The department also hosts online webinars on leadership and wellness topics. In addition, each division of the department offers education, training and technical assistance on engagement principles related to its specific functional area.

Diversity, Equity and Inclusion

Advancing equity requires intentional skill-building so that employees are equipped with the knowledge and skills they need to address the public's concerns and remove barriers to their participation. The NCDHHS Office of Health Equity provides training opportunities for staff to learn more about diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI), historically marginalized populations, and how to apply an equity lens to their work.



Ongoing Improvement of Public Access and Participation

NCDHHS will regularly examine its recommended public participation practices to ensure they are modern, relevant, and easy to access and deploy. It will also seek input on best practices from a diverse representation of staff, community partners and other stakeholders. Staff are encouraged to tailor their individual program public participation methods to meet the needs of their specific stakeholders and evaluate success based on the measurement of their unique engagement activities.

To evaluate public participation programs, staff should:

- Set goals for participation and establish a strategy for meeting them.
- Identify key metrics to track progress such as increasing the number of participants, website visitors or comments collected.
- Determine method of capturing data and use it to drive decision-making.
- Report results to be transparent with the people it serves.

This Public Participation Plan is a living document that will be updated annually. It will be improved by the department's awareness of and sensitivity to the changing diversity of the state's population, needs of its communities, and evolution of the technology and methods used for outreach.



APPENDIX

Mission

In collaboration with our partners, DHHS provides essential services to improve the health, safety and well-being of all North Carolinians.

Vision

Advancing innovative solutions that foster independence, improve health and promote well-being for all North Carolinians.

Values



Belonging: Intentionally promote an inclusive, equitable workplace that reflects the communities we serve, where everyone feels a sense of belonging, and our diverse backgrounds and experiences are valued and recognized as strengths.



Joy: Have joy and balance at work so we all bring our A-game when serving the people of North Carolina.



People-Focused: Focus on the people we serve, deliver value and make a positive impact on their lives and communities.



Proactive Communication: Maintain an open and trusting environment for collaboration and continuous improvement with our team, stakeholders and the people we serve.



Stewardship: Be good stewards of resources and time to create a positive impact for those we serve.



Teamwork: We are all one Department, one team, working toward one goal: to improve the health, safety and well-being of all North Carolinians.



Transparency: Share expertise, information and honest feedback within the Department and with stakeholders and the community. Ask for help when needed.



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