

looking toward 2024

health & wellness



Everyone deserves to be healthy regardless of status, resources or circumstances.

As a health legacy foundation, Dogwood Health Trust's existence is rooted in health. It defines our purpose to dramatically improve the health and well-being of all communities in the 18 counties and the Qualla Boundary of Western North Carolina.

We recognize that only 20% of health outcomes are determined by clinical care. Therefore, our focus extends beyond the delivery of health care to addressing the social drivers of health – those non-medical factors that influence health outcomes, such as education, economic stability, social environment and the built environment of the home and neighborhood.

Since Dogwood's creation in 2019, our Health & Wellness team has worked to be responsive to the needs of the community, especially in the traditional areas of health and health care. Through community conversations, our team has heard concerns around access to care in rural areas; the availability of mental, substance use and oral health care; the health of women, infants and elders; and, the unique challenges faced by those living with disabilities, lower incomes and in marginalized communities.

The emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic introduced new acute needs that required immediate attention.

Through these early and challenging years, we recognized the importance of focusing on a few key pillars that demand concentrated efforts to disrupt entrenched and difficult issues. Specifically, we are deeply concerned about the struggle with mental health and substance use, access to comprehensive health services, the adequacy and well-being of our region's health professionals and the sustainability of food systems supporting good nutrition.

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Looking Toward 2024

In the next year, the Health & Wellness team will focus its attention on these four concerns, with some exciting opportunities emerging.

Substance Use Disorder

In 2021, 16 of the 18 Western North Carolina counties were in the "high" or "highest" categories for the percent of overdose deaths with illicit drug involvement, according to the Community Opioid Resources Engine for North Carolina.

This epidemic is impacting many Western North Carolinians, often taking root in the young people in our communities. The crisis extends beyond the individuals with substance use disorder; it affects families, workplaces and the local economy.

Dogwood aims to create environments that deter our youth from substance misuse, engage them through preventive strategies and education, and provide ongoing support to adolescents and young adults to help them achieve their life goals. Working in conjunction with Dogwood's Education team, we will explore opportunities for collaboration with both school systems and organizations that provide out-of-school time programs and support.

We will continue to work with municipalities throughout the region as they implement plans focused on long-term support for individuals with substance use disorder, including recovery, employment, housing and restoration of family and relationships.

Accessible Health Ecosystems

Residents in Western North Carolina need a health ecosystem that allows them to access the services they need in a timely manner. A health ecosystem can

involve many types of providers and supports so that all patients have access to affordable primary care and related clinical and social services. It is vital that everyone can get comprehensive care for all of their health needs, including perinatal, dental and mental health and for the services that cover unique needs across the lifespan. To help support the stability and accessibility of this ecosystem, we will work with our partners, including Federally Qualified Health Centers, free clinics and health departments, to understand existing systems, identify gaps and develop strategies to bridge them.

Health Professions Workforce

Timely access to health services is not possible without an adequate, available and appreciated workforce. While workforce pipeline efforts often center on physicians and nurses, care delivery requires many types of professions to keep clinics running and operational, including office staff, medical technicians, certified nursing assistants and many others. Professionals, such as community health workers, who support and address the wide range of issues influencing people's health are critical as well. We will work with partners to understand the health professions landscape, collaborate with Dogwood's Education and Economic Opportunity teams on development of the future workforce and consider factors that promote retention.

Equity in the Essentials

Dogwood's work focuses on the social drivers of health and with Dogwood teams addressing Education, Housing, and Economic Opportunity, the Health & Wellness team has ample opportunity for collaboration.

There are additional drivers of health that merit attention, particularly food and nutrition. This past year, our food delivery partners experienced increased community need, fewer donations and higher food costs. While we work to address these needs, we must consider the causes. In 2024, Dogwood will work with our food and nutrition partners on strategies to build more permanent solutions, help secure locally produced food, support our WNC farmers and focus on improved distribution, especially in rural areas.

In addition to food and nutrition, we recognize that there are many other gaps in access to essentials that individuals and families in our region require. Partnerships with organizations that provide direct assistance to families and individuals for essential needs (such as transportation, diapers, household items and clothing) continue to be a top priority.

Health needs in our region are multi-faceted and complex. Dogwood looks forward to participating with the many innovative and committed partners across the region so that more of our neighbors can thrive.



Vice President – Health & Wellness