



## 2021 State of the County Health Report





## About this report

The Alexander County Health Department (ACHD) is pleased to present the 2021 State of the County Health (SOTCH) Report. As part of North Carolina's local health department accreditation process and consolidated contract, the Alexander County Health Department is required to submit a comprehensive Community Health Assessment (CHA) every four years. During the years between health assessments, a State of the County Health Report is issued. The SOTCH Report is an abbreviated version of the larger health assessment and is intended to provide a quick overview of the health of Alexander County.

The CHA is a community-driven report that reflects health concerns affecting the longevity and quality of life for Alexander County's residents. It also identifies overarching themes in the local data. Community health priorities emerge from this report and the Alexander County Health Department works to improve the overall health of county residents by addressing these health priorities. These areas include substance abuse, mental health, and healthy families/healthy lifestyles.

The SOTCH serves as a way to ensure that progress is being made toward addressing these priorities, identifies emerging issues and discusses new initiatives. This report includes updated information on health priorities that were identified in the 2018 Community Health Assessment and builds on progress made in the 2019 and 2020 SOTCH reports.

Because socioeconomic factors often affect our health, demographic and other baseline information precedes the health data. It is used to provide background information and context on the county and its residents.

The information contained in this SOTCH report is designed to educate and update community members, community leaders, agencies, organizations, and others on the progress in addressing certain health issues. This update is also intended to influence the development of new policies that affect the health of the community, guide the planning of health programs and recruit interested community members to participate in future activities.

This report, along with previous SOTCH and CHA reports, is made available to the public on our website:

[www.alexanderhealth.org](http://www.alexanderhealth.org).

Sincerely,

Leeanne Whisnant, MS, RN

**Leeanne Whisnant, MS, RN**

Health & Human Services Director, Alexander County

### 2018 CHA HEALTH PRIORITIES

1. HEALTHY LIFESTYLES
2. MENTAL HEALTH
3. SUBSTANCE USE DISORDER



One of the expansive views from [Rocky Face Mountain Recreational Area](#)

# Overview of Alexander County

## Community Overview

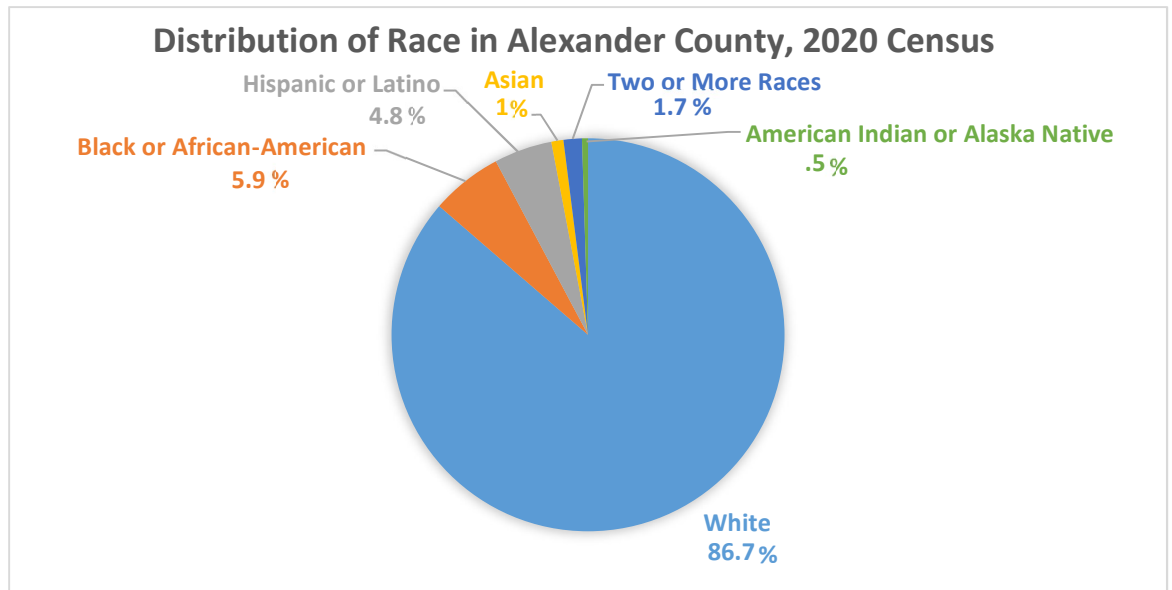
Located in the foothills region of western North Carolina, Alexander County is comprised of 263 square miles. Two-thirds of the county is farmland, with an average farm size of 90 acres that produces commodities such as poultry, dairy, tobacco, apples, forestry products, grain crops and beef cattle. Other primary industries include furniture, textiles, education, health services, professional, business services, trade, transportation, and utilities.

Alexander County offers a variety of outdoor attractions for citizens and visitors to enjoy including hiking, rock climbing and geocaching at Rocky Face Mountain Recreational Area, gem mining, swimming, running in one of the county’s numerous road race events, boating or fishing on Lake Hickory, and riding your ATV at one of the county’s all-terrain parks. Alexander County strives to offer its citizens and visitors numerous opportunities to remain active and fit.



## Population

According to the U.S. Census Bureau’s 2020 update, the final total estimated population for Alexander County in 2021 was 36,444, which is a slight decrease (2%) from the recorded population of 37,198 in the 2010 Census.<sup>1</sup> Alexander County is a predominantly white community with a median age of 44<sup>3</sup> and a median household income of \$48,756.<sup>1</sup>



## Educational Obtainment

The U.S. Census Bureau estimates show that in Alexander County, 82.4% of the population has obtained a high school diploma or equivalent and 14.2% holds a bachelor’s degree or higher.<sup>1</sup> These figures match the data from the 2020 SOTCH and continue to remain lower than the state averages of 87.8% and 31.3% respectively.<sup>1</sup>

The Alexander County high school dropout rate of 18% continues to be higher than the state average at 12%.<sup>2</sup>

## Poverty & Unemployment

In 2019, 11.7% of people in Alexander County reported incomes below the United States poverty level. North Carolina’s poverty level is slightly higher at 12.9%.<sup>1</sup> The unemployment rate reported in the 2018 Alexander County CHA was 3.9%, slightly higher than the November 2021 period rate of 3.2%, but significantly less than the 2020 annual rate of 7.4%.<sup>3</sup>

## Access to Care

Alexander County is a medically underserved community. There exists a severe shortage of medical care providers in all medical areas. The ratio of health care providers to citizens in Alexander County compared to the state average is listed to the right.<sup>4</sup>

2019 Health Professionals per 10,000 Population		
	Alexander County	North Carolina
Primary Care Physicians	2.3	7.1
Physician Assistants	1.8	6.6
Nurse Practitioners	3.1	8.3
Dentists	1.3	5.2
Pharmacists	4.9	11.3
Registered Nurses	36.1	98.9
Psychologists	0	2.2
Optometrists	.26	1.2
Physical Therapy	1.8	6.8
Occupational Therapists	2.1	3.6

## Leading Causes of Death

2019 Causes of Death	
1	Diseases of the heart
2	Cancer
3	Alzheimer’s disease
4	Chronic lower respiratory diseases
5	Cerebrovascular diseases
6	All other unintentional injuries
7	Diabetes mellitus
8	Assault (homicide)
	Chronic liver disease and (cirrhosis)
	Motor vehicle injuries
	Parkinson’s disease
Source: N.C. State Center for Health Statistics	

In the most recent data from N.C. Center for Health Statistics, diseases of the heart was the leading cause of death in Alexander County.<sup>5</sup> Diseases of the heart was closely followed by cancer.<sup>5</sup> Alzheimer’s disease ranked as the third most prevalent cause of death in 2019.<sup>5</sup> Noted in the 2014 CHA, the deaths associated with Alzheimer’s disease had shown an upward trend since 2010.

High blood pressure, obesity/overweight, poor nutrition, limited physical activity, high cholesterol, tobacco use and substance use disorder are the most prevalent risk factors that can increase the chance of developing a chronic disease.

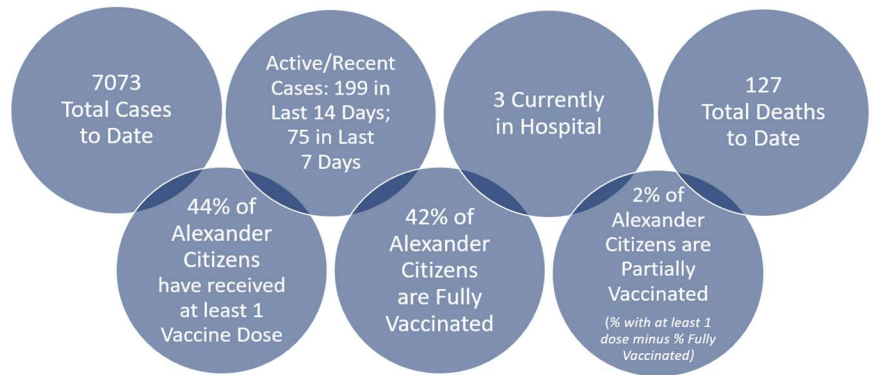
The chart (left) shows the leading causes of death in Alexander County for 2019, the most recent published data period at the time of this publication. Cancer became Alexander County’s leading cause of death in 2011 and has retained one of the top ranking causes since that time. Through its commitment to healthy lifestyles education, the Alexander County Health Department and community partners continue to work to address this issue along with diseases of the heart.

# 2021 Areas of Focus & Pandemic Progress

## Covid-19

Utilizing its 2018 Community Health Assessment (CHA), 2019 and 2020 State of the County Health (SOTCH) reports, Alexander County's Community Health Improvement Plan focus areas for 2021 remained Mental Health, Substance Use Disorder and Healthy Lifestyles, the latter of which continued to include messaging around health measures for safety and wellness during the Covid-19 pandemic. Covid-19 focus areas that continued throughout 2021 included communicating factual messages to assist in slowing the spread of Covid-19 disease, providing diagnostic testing and providing vaccine doses according to North Carolina's phased rollout to eligible populations.

As we continue to gather data on Covid-19 and its impact on Alexander County, hospitalization and mortality data remain particularly difficult to obtain in a consistent manner since Alexander County has no hospital of its own and therefore must rely on data from the four healthcare systems across our borders for data relating to Alexander County citizens. As was the case in 2020, these two metrics continue to vary slightly from the State's dashboard data. Due in part to this circumstance, and mostly in response to requests for clearer data by our community, the Health Department updated its Covid-19 Dashboard to better illustrate trends in Covid-19 cases and rates of vaccination in 2021 as evidenced by the example from December 20, 2021.



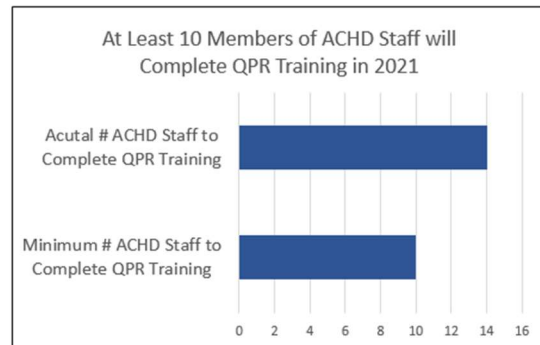
Total, Weekly & Bi-Weekly Case Numbers plus Vaccination Percentages from NCDHHS Covid-19 Dashboard

To help our community reduce the rate of Covid-19 transmission, Alexander County Health Department provided drive-thru and curbside PCR testing and administered over 16,300 doses of vaccine. We continue to provide curbside testing and doses of first, second, third/immunocompromised, and booster Pfizer vaccine for patients ages 5 and older and Moderna vaccine for patients ages 18 and older, according to authorizations, approvals and guidance by North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services (NCDHHS), Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), and U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA). The Health Department also continues to counter the effects of Covid-19 mis- and disinformation with facts, transparency and sympathy, responding in a timely manner to inquiries by the general public; education, business and industry leaders; and the media; and by providing one-voice situational updates through the County's Covid team members and Code Red messaging service, on our website and social media platforms.

# Progress on Key Priorities from 2018 CHA

Beyond Covid-19, Alexander County Public Health further continued to address community

- mental health needs by:
  - training staff in the intentional self-harm/suicide prevention program *Question, Persuade, Refer (QPR)*
  - collaborating with Alexander Senior Center to offer the same training for our at-risk senior population in spring 2022, and
  - applying for the NC GlaxoSmithKline Foundation Child Health Award to assist with the provision of behavioral health care to low income patients after the Rural Health Grant was not renewed for 2022



- substance use disorder needs by:
  - participating in Golden Opportunity Day with Alexander County Department of Social Services to provide health education and promote *Lock Your Meds*, distributing 18 medication lock boxes to area seniors through a grant partnership with RHA Prevention Resource Center
  - creating the media campaign "5 Tips to Prevent an Overdose" through the Healthy Communities program of NCDHHS, and
  - promoting the campaign which includes, in part, recognition of overdose signs and symptoms, introduction to NC Good Samaritan and Naloxone Access Laws, and resources for additional information, alongside *Lock Your Meds* & #*naloxonesaveslives* in our social media, on our website, County Television and Charter Media channels



Billboard Impressions	Facebook Impressions	Government TV Impressions	Flyers/Handouts
517,392	2,171	15,000	50

Campaigns: *Lock Your Meds*; #*NaloxoneSavesLives* & *5 Tips to Prevent an Overdose*

- healthy lifestyles needs by:
  - promoting nutrient-dense foods, physical activity and tobacco cessation messaging and opportunities via our website and social media
  - participating in NC MedAssist Mobile Free Pharmacy event with The Bridge Community of Alexander County

- o certifying our health educator as a trainer for *CATCH® My Breath* and training three new community leaders in the program
- o collaborating with Cabarrus Health Alliance to facilitate the free provision in 2022 of *Journey to a Healthier Me*, the minority diabetes prevention program, and
- o collaborating with UNC Center for Health Promotion and Disease Prevention to become a research site for their 2022 phase 2 study of *Med-South Lifestyle Program*, a program created to provide free, local education designed to improve heart health and lower A1C

Med-South Lifestyle Program Participant Recruitment Data

# Total Participants to be Enrolled for Study	Estimated # Potential Participants Reached Via						# Who Responded to Outreach with Interest in Learning Program Details	# Undecided or Not Interested in Proceeding to Next Step	# Interested to Proceed to Next Step with UNC	# Submitted to UNC	# Enrolled	# Pending	# Unable to Enroll to Date
	Personal Contact	HR Email	Emails to Partner Agencies	Referrals from Area Physicians & Providers	ACHD Website & Facebook Postings	Total # Contacted &/or Reached							
15	3	700	15	2	941	1661	19	0	19	19	7	12	0

## Key Partnerships

Key partner relationships including Alexander County Department of Social Services, Alexander County Safe Kids Coalition, Alexander County Senior Center, The Bridge Community, Cabarrus Health Alliance, CATCH Global Foundation/CATCH® My Breath, NC Area Health Education Centers, North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services, North Carolina Emergency Management, NC MedAssist, North Carolina Region 4 Tobacco-Free Alliance, RHA Prevention Resource Center, Shelter Home of Caldwell & Alexander Counties, UNC Center for Health Promotion and Disease Prevention, and Vaya Health were largely maintained through telecommunications and web-based programs such as Zoom and Microsoft Teams.

## 2022 Accreditation & Community Health Assessment

Planning began for our accreditation survey that will occur in the fall of 2022 after postponement in 2020 and 2021 due to Covid-19. In order to further greater transparency, more active involvement by our citizens, and a deeper understanding of population accountability, our accreditation process, as well as our 2022 CHA, and our Healthy Communities grant activities are managed using the *Results-Based Accountability (RBA)* process. Through collaboration with North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services, North Carolina Area Health Education Centers and Foundation for Health Leadership & Innovation, *RBA* was made available to us and our health educator was able to complete the *Results-Based Accountability* professional certification course in November 2021.

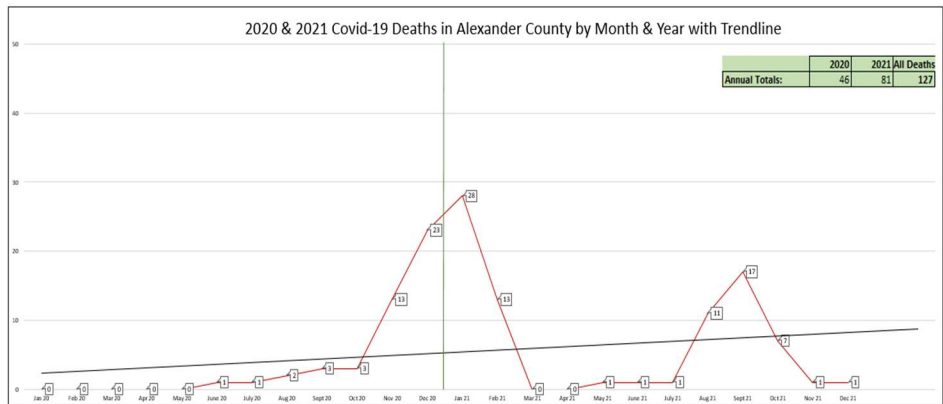
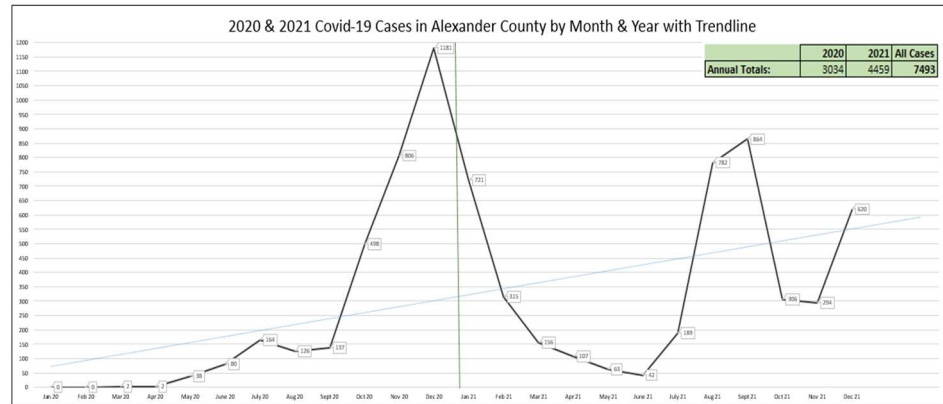
## Morbidity and Mortality Changes since 2020 SOTCH

In 2021 in Alexander County, as in much of North Carolina, the United States and the world, the most significant change in morbidity and mortality continued to be the result of the Covid-19 pandemic. Based on updated data reflecting the number of positive tests and deaths per week for 2020 and 2021, we are now able to more accurately compare the case and mortality rates for both years.

As of December 31, 2020, there were 3,034 total confirmed cases and 46 confirmed deaths from Covid-19 in Alexander County. Utilizing 36,444 as the county population total from the 2020 Census, the rate of Covid disease was 8,325.1 cases per 100,000 residents for the year. The mortality rate from Covid-19 for the same period was 126.2 per 100,000 residents.

During 2021 there were an additional 4,459 confirmed infections and an additional 81 confirmed deaths in Alexander County, representing a case rate of 12,235.2 per 100,000 residents and a mortality rate of 295.2 per 100,000 residents for that year.

Cumulatively from the start of the pandemic until the period end on December 31, 2021, the total number of cases rose to 7,493 and the number of deaths rose to 127 for a total Covid-19 infection case rate of 20,560.3 per 100,000 residents and a mortality rate from Covid disease of 348.5 per 100,000 residents across both years.



## Emerging Issues since 2018 CHA

When SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes Covid-19, infected our population and caused Covid-19 disease, it naturally affected health outcomes for our citizens by causing a range of illness states from asymptomatic to severe and long-haulers. The emergence of the Delta and Omicron variants in 2021 furthered the impact by infecting and hospitalizing more children and by spreading much more rapidly through the population, respectively. Both variant surges, in combination with passage of time, caused us to see some diminished vaccine effectiveness and increased rates of both breakthrough and reinfection cases.

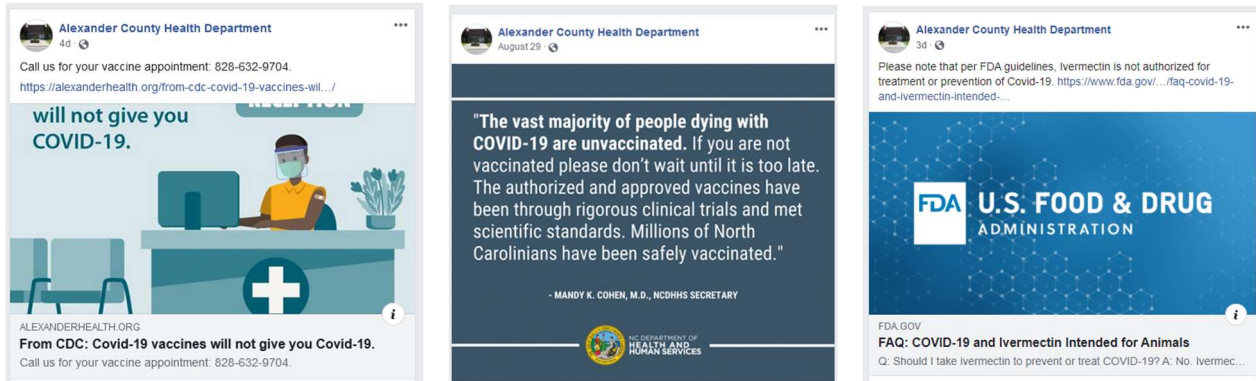
Many places of employment, having fully reopened, returned to virtual or hybrid work models. Some closed entirely, leading to additional mental and emotional strain and increasing joblessness. Congruently, an exodus of retirement-eligible workers has placed additional strain on employers. Employees are covering additional shifts and some have reported an unwillingness to share their personally identifiable information when attempting to report the results of a positive take-home Covid-19 test for concern they will not be able to attend work or that their children will be unable to attend school.

Residential pressures have also increased as the moratorium on evictions ended in 2021, placing both tenants and landlords at risk of losing designated housing properties. A disruption of the supply chain further exacerbated food insecurity for individuals and families. The pressures of last year's hybrid school model that increased children and families' anxieties and limited access to regular meals for a number of children have led to a few disruptions at public meetings amid calls for students to remain in class and unmasked, regardless of their exposure to positive cases.



Lower income populations, rural populations, migrant workers and local populations of color were disproportionately affected in all ways as they had less access to high-speed internet and online devices or services for food, medical and disinfectant supplies ordering and delivery, school programs and online education, and for entertainment during quarantine and isolation periods.

Mis- and disinformation continued to spread regarding Covid-19 and its origins as well as the safety and efficacy of vaccines and authorized or approved treatments for Covid-19 disease. Local farm supply retailers ran out of Ivermectin, an agricultural de-worming medication, after inaccurate reports and endorsements in national media and online falsely indicated it to be a treatment and/or preventative for Covid-19 infection.



## Paused or Discontinued Initiatives since 2018 CHA

In September 2021 Alexander County Public Health's behavioral health program was paused due to the search for a new licensed clinical social worker (CSW). The position remains open and will remain so until filled. Patients cared for as part of the program were referred to other resources as appropriate prior to departure of our previous CSW.

## Looking Ahead to 2022-2023, Continuations & New Initiatives

The Health Department continues to provide Covid-19 vaccinations for all eligible populations, expanding provision to include newly eligible age groups and additional doses as authorized or approved by NCDHHS, the CDC and the FDA. While Alexander County still has room for improvement in terms of our overall vaccination rate, Alexander County Health Department and our community partner agencies including Iredell Family Care Center, Peoples Drug, Town & Country Drug, Office Practice of Pharmacy and Walmart Pharmacy have assured that 46% of our citizens have been vaccinated with at least one dose and 43% have been fully vaccinated of Covid-19 vaccine. The later represents a 53% increase over the number fully vaccinated in 2020.

As part of our total commitment to healthy lifestyles and to assist our citizens in securing local heart-healthy education that may assist in reducing A1C s and the risk of diabetes, Alexander County Health Department will begin offering the *Med-South Lifestyle Program* in 2022 as part of a UNC Center for Health Promotion and Disease Prevention research grant funded through CDC, as well as facilitating appropriate referrals to Cabarrus Health Alliance for the minority diabetes prevention program *Journey to a Healthier Me*. The vetting process to become a participating site and the education and training for our implementation team members were completed in 2021 for *Med-South Lifestyle Program*, as was the collaboration agreement with Cabarrus Health Alliance. The Health Department began patient recruitment in December of 2021.



**MED-SOUTH**  
LIFESTYLE PROGRAM

**Interested in a FREE program to improve heart health?**

Are you:

- Between 18-80 years old?
- Interested in learning about how to improve your eating habits and increase your physical activity?

If so, you may be eligible to participate in a research study conducted by UNC-Chapel Hill. The purpose of this study is to test how best to get health departments and community health centers to deliver proven programs that help adults change their eating and physical activity behavior to improve heart health.

Participation includes:

- Three phone surveys lasting 30-45 minutes (at the beginning of the program, at the end of the 4-month program, and after the 10-month final visit).
- Four monthly visits with a health counselor (45-60 minutes)
- The 1<sup>st</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> visits are in-person and scheduled between 8AM-5PM. We take your weight and blood pressure at these visits.
- Three phone check-ins with a health counselor (10-15 minutes) in the first 4 months, and two brief phone check-ins during the last 6 months.

You will receive \$120 total for answering study questions by phone (\$40 at the start, \$40 at the 4-month visit, and \$40 at the final 10-month visit).

If you are interested in Med-South, contact one of our staff listed below:  
Kimberly Edmisten: 828-352-7810  
Ana Griffin: 828-352-7790

**This research project is funded by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).**

This study was reviewed and approved by the University of North Carolina Institutional Review Board. IRB #21-1281.

# Acknowledgements

The Alexander County Health Department’s mission is to achieve a healthy community by protecting and promoting Public Health through education, training, and promotion of health services and advocacy. If you have questions regarding the information provided in the report, services, or comments on how to better serve the community, please contact the Health Department at 828-632-9704.

The 2021 SOTCH report is available to the public at the Alexander County Health Department located at 338 1st Avenue South West in Taylorsville. This report will also be available at all Alexander County Library Main Branch, Stony Point Branch, and Bethlehem Branch, as well as the Alexander County Administration Office located at 621 Liledoun Road in Taylorsville, and on the website [AlexanderHealth.org](http://AlexanderHealth.org).

## 2019-2023 Consolidated Human Services Advisory Committee Membership

Barbara Hayes  
Thomas Rider, DDS  
Richard Williams, DC, LAT, ATC, CCEP  
Jennifer Hull, DVM  
Hazel Yoder  
Betty Long  
Scott Westmoreland, PE  
Macy Jones

Doug & Chris Howes  
Geraldine Perry  
Shirley Mays  
Pat Wilkinson  
John Watts, RPh  
Phillip Sprinkle, PharmD  
Lora Taraban, NP  
Steve McKinnon, MD

## 2021 Board of County Commissioners

Ronnie Reese, Chairman  
Marty Pennell, Vice-Chairman  
Josh Lail  
Larry Yoder  
Kent Herman

## State of the County Health Report Planning Team

Leeanne Whisnant, MS, RN – Health & Human Services Director  
Billie Walker, MSN, RN- Assistant Health Director  
Kimberly Edmisten- Health Educator

## References

<sup>1</sup>“U.S. Census Bureau QuickFacts: Alexander County, North Carolina.” Census Bureau QuickFacts, United States Census Bureau, [www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/dashboard/alexandercountynorthcarolina/PST045219](https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/dashboard/alexandercountynorthcarolina/PST045219).

<sup>2</sup>“Alexander County NC Education Data.” Towncharts Education Data, Towncharts, [www.towncharts.com/North-Carolina/Education/Alexander-County-NC-Education-data.html](https://www.towncharts.com/North-Carolina/Education/Alexander-County-NC-Education-data.html).

<sup>3</sup>“Access NC: County Profile- Alexander County (NC).” Access NC, NC Department of Commerce, Feb. 2020, County Profile Alexander County (NC). PDF. <https://accessnc.nccommerce.com/DemoGraphicsReports/pdfs/countyProfile/NC/37003.pdf>

<sup>4</sup>“North Carolina Health Professional Supply Data.” Sheps Health Workforce NC, UNC Cecil G. Sheps Center for Health Services Research, [nhealthworkforce.unc.edu/supply/](https://nhealthworkforce.unc.edu/supply/).

<sup>5</sup>“2019 Leading Causes of Death in Alexander County, N.C. State Center for Health Statistics, NCDHHS, <https://schs.dph.ncdhhs.gov/interactive/query/lcd/getleadcauses.cfm>.

