



2019 State of the County Health Report





About this report

The Alexander County Health Department (ACHD) is pleased to present the 2019 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.

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 2016 and 2017 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.

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 ABUSE



The Hiddenite Festival Road Race, one of several road races held in Alexander County, offers residents and visitors the opportunity to compete in runs of 5K, 10K, or half marathon distances.

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, and producing 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.

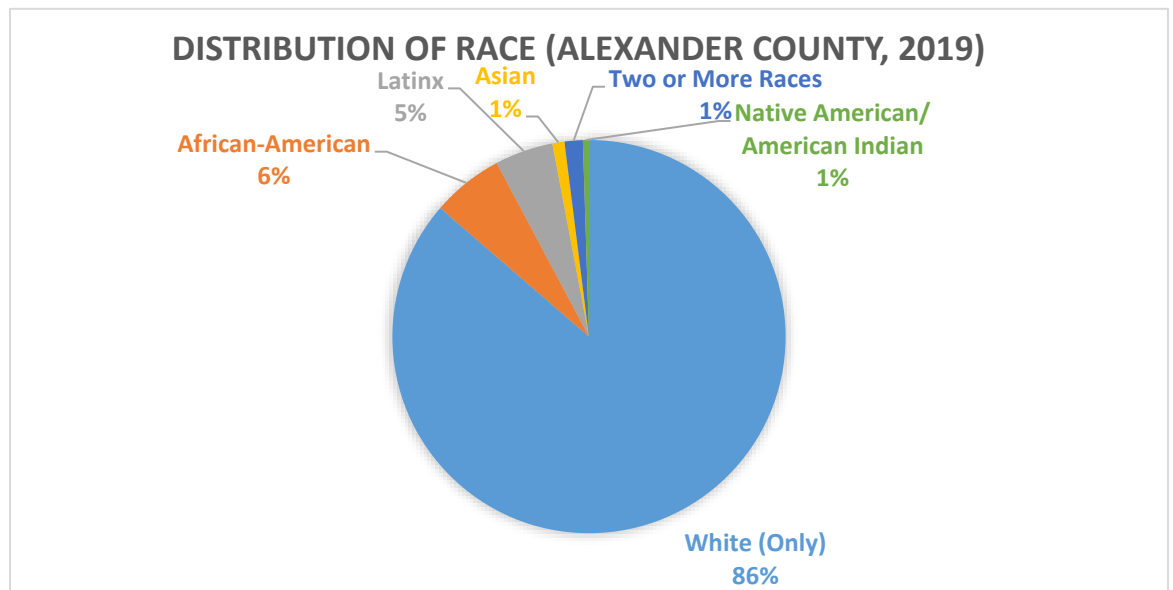
Alexander County offers a variety of outdoor attractions for citizens and visitors to enjoy, whether it is hiking or rock climbing at Rocky Face Mountain Recreational Area, gem mining, swimming,

and running in one of the county's numerous road race events, boating or fishing on Lake Hickory, or riding your ATV at one of the county's all-terrain parks. Alexander County strives to offer its citizens and visitors with numerous opportunities to remain active and fit.



Population

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, the total estimated population for Alexander County in 2019 was 37,353, which is a slight increase from the recorded population of 37,198 in the 2010 Census.¹ Alexander County is a predominantly white community with a median age of 42.8 and a median household income of \$44,961.¹



Educational Obtainment

U.S. Census Bureau estimates show that in Alexander County, 81.6% of the population has obtained a high school diploma or equivalent, and 14.7% hold a bachelor's degree or higher¹. Both figures have increased since the 2017 SOTCH, but remain lower than the state average of 87.4%, and 30.5% respectively¹. The high school

dropout rate is higher than the state average at 18% compared to 13%.²

Poverty & Unemployment

In 2019, 13% of people in Alexander County reported incomes below the United States poverty level. North Carolina’s poverty level is slightly higher at 14%.¹The unemployment rate reported in the 2014 Alexander County CHA was 7.6%; as of July 2019, this has fallen to 3.2%.³

2017-2018 Health Professionals per 10,000 Population

| | Alexander County | North Carolina |
|-------------------------|------------------|----------------|
| Primary Care Physicians | 3.1 | 7 |
| Physician Assistants | 1.6 | 6.2 |
| Nurse Practitioners | 2.9 | 7.1 |
| Dentists | 1.8 | 5.1 |
| Pharmacists | 4.9 | 11.3 |
| Registered Nurses | 35.2 | 101 |
| Psychologists | 0 | 2.2 |
| Optometrists | .26 | 1.2 |
| Physical Therapy | 1.8 | 7 |
| Occupational Therapists | 1.8 | 3.5 |

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.⁴

Leading Causes of Death

In the most recent data from N.C. Center for Health Statistics, cancer once again was the leading cause of death in Alexander County⁵. Diseases of the heart closely followed cancer.⁵ Alzheimer’s disease ranked as the third most prevalent cause of death in 2018.⁵ Noted in the 2014 CHA, the deaths associated with Alzheimer’s disease has shown an upward trend since 2010.

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

The chart (right) shows the leading causes of death in Alexander County for 2018. *Data for 2019 will not be available until fall 2020.* Cancer became the leading cause of death in 2011 and has retained the top ranking continually since then. The Alexander County Health Department and community partners continue to work to address this issue.

| 2016 Causes of Death | |
|----------------------|------------------------------------|
| 1 | Cancer |
| 2 | Diseases of the heart |
| 3 | Alzheimer’s disease |
| 4 | Cerebrovascular disease |
| 5 | Chronic lower respiratory diseases |
| 6 | Influenza and pneumonia |
| 7 | Nephritis |
| | Parkinson’s disease |
| 9 | Motor vehicle injuries |
| 10 | Diabetes mellitus |

Source: N.C. State Center for Health Statistics

Progress toward Priorities

Healthy Lifestyles

The Healthy Alexandrians Task Force selected improving overall health of the population as a health priority we entitled this “Healthy Lifestyles”. This is a continuation of the 2014 CHA priority Healthy Families. The Health Department has been looking for innovative solutions to address healthy lifestyles.

The Health Department’s health educator has been promoting health and wellness through classes in our school system, employment health fairs, and collaborating with local agencies. Health Department staff are active members of the local Safe Kids Coalition. The Safe Kids Coalition focuses on reducing child mortalities and injuries by educating families and the community on safety tips such as fire safety or poisoning prevention. Through a grant written by our health educator Safe Kids- Alexander was able to receive bicycle helmets. Collaborating with Taylorsville Walmart, Safe Kids held a Bike Rodeo in the spring of 2019.



In 2019, the Alexander County Health Department collaborated with the Alexander County Cooperative Extension Office to implement Faithful Families. Faithful Families recognizes that faith communities play a unique role in supporting their community’s health and decreasing health disparities.¹⁰ This 10-week course created by NC State University, allows local health departments and cooperative extension agencies to work with faith communities and educate them on healthy eating and physical activity practices. The curriculum also helps faith communities to implement policy, systems, and environmental supports.¹⁰ Third Creek Baptist



Church was the first to participate and complete the Faithful Families curriculum. The Health Department and Cooperative Extension continue to work with Third Creek to develop and implement policy, systems, and environmental changes.

The Alexander County Health Department has continued its partnership with the Alexander County Cooperative Extension, the Alexander County Partnership for Children, and NC A&T State University to present Speedway to Healthy to preschool and elementary students in 2019. Speedway to Healthy is a walk-through exhibit representing the human body and serves to combat childhood obesity and poor health among children in Alexander County. Our health educator participated in explaining to third-graders from all elementary schools the benefits of healthy eating.



Alexander County has the lowest percentage in the state with adequate access to locations for physical activity. In the coming years, the Health Department would like to work with the County on plans or policies that would increase physical activity opportunities for residents.

Mental Health

The first focus area selected for the 2018 Community Health Assessment was mental health. Mental health was chosen as a priority in the 2014 Community Health Assessment as well. Mental Health continues to be a complex and challenging issue to address in Alexander County. In October 2016, Smoky Mountain LME/MCO became Vaya Health. Vaya Health serves 23 counties in North Carolina, including Alexander. The Alexander County Health Department, in collaboration with Vaya Health, is working to combat the issues with mental health. In December 2017, the Health Department collaborated with Vaya Health to offer Mental Health First Aid Training. This course teaches participants the skills needed to respond and

assist anyone who is exhibiting signs of mental illness and substance use. The class allows 30 participants and 27 people from various backgrounds, including law enforcement, DSS, the general public, and others to attend and complete the training. Due to the success of the first Mental Health First Aid (MHFA) Training, the Health Department hosted another training in May of 2018. The other MHFA Training focused on how to respond to Youth with behavior and mental health issues appropriately.

Connecting residents to mental health services have been a focus of the Health Department. According to the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation County Health Rankings and Roadmaps, there are 2,330 residents to one mental health provider in Alexander County, as compared to the state average of 440 to one.⁷ In January of 2018, the Health

Department received a grant to create an in-house behavioral health program. The Health Department is adding this program to increase services provided in the area and to decrease the ratio of residents per mental health



providers. The Health Department designated three offices to the new behavioral health program. The Health Department now has a counseling room for adults and a separate counseling room for children. The new Licensed Clinical Social Worker was hired in August 2019 and has spent the first few months developing policies for the new program and becoming credentialed with private and public insurance companies. The goal is to bring awareness to the issue of mental health in Alexander County and work with community leaders to develop innovative solutions to decrease the suicide rate, which remains substantially higher than the state average.⁸



Substance Abuse

Vaping

In the past, opioid misuse and opioid overdoses have been the focus of the Substance Abuse section in the Alexander County SOTCH, and CHA reports. Since the 2018 CHA, Health Department staff has worked with local agencies in writing grants to create a post-overdose response team, and a jail-based health program to help mitigate the opioid crisis. Unfortunately, the Health Department has been unsuccessful in obtaining funding for these programs. However, even with a lack of resources, the opioid overdose rate has decreased in Alexander County since 2016. The Substance Abuse Task Force often meets to discuss substance abuse issues on the rise in Alexander County, and new grants or programs that may help Alexander County address these concerns. Vaping has come to the attention of the Task Force in the past year as an issue that needs to be addressed.



Vaping has reached epidemic proportions across the United States. From 2011-2017, vaping in North Carolina increased among high school students by nearly 900%.⁶ To address the growing concern of vaping among teens in Alexander County, the Health Department has partnered with Alexander County Schools to implement the evidence-based program CATCH My Breath, and the alternative to suspension program ASPIRE. The CATCH My Breath™, Youth E-cigarette Prevention Program’s goal is to increase students’ knowledge of E-cigarettes, nicotine, and addiction dangers while reducing their intended use of the product in the future.⁸ The CATCH curriculum consists of six 30-minute lessons and is taught by the school nurses at both middle schools and the high school. In 2019, Alexander County Schools were looking for a solution to curb e-cigarette use on school campuses. The Health Department suggested the alternative to suspension program Aspire. Aspire is an online module that consists of 8 lessons that inform students of the dangers of e-cigarette use and gives them tips and resources to avoid the temptation to smoke or to stop smoking. Alexander Central High School’s new school policy is any student caught vaping, or with vaping devices on school property will be given the option of having 5 days out of school suspension or 3 days in-school suspension and required to complete the ASPIRE program.

Alexander Central High School, in partnership with the Health Department, also participated in research with the State Laboratory of Public Health. E-cigarette devices confiscated at the high school were sent to the State Lab to be tested for nicotine prevalence. The State Lab reported that nicotine was present in 85% of the devices collected from across the state, and of the e-cigarettes collected, 43% were Juuls.



There is no county-level data for vaping use among teens in Alexander County. In the spring of 2019, Project Lazarus reached out to the Health Department to request participation in the Partnership for Success Grant provided through the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA). Project Lazarus received the grant, and staff from Project Lazarus started working with the Alexander County School System to evaluate the needs. The grant will work with school-age children to decrease substance abuse in later life. Alcohol, tobacco, and one other substance are the focus areas of this program. The county-level data gathered through the Partnership for Success Grant will give the Health Department a better understanding of the prevalence of substance misuse, including vaping among teens.

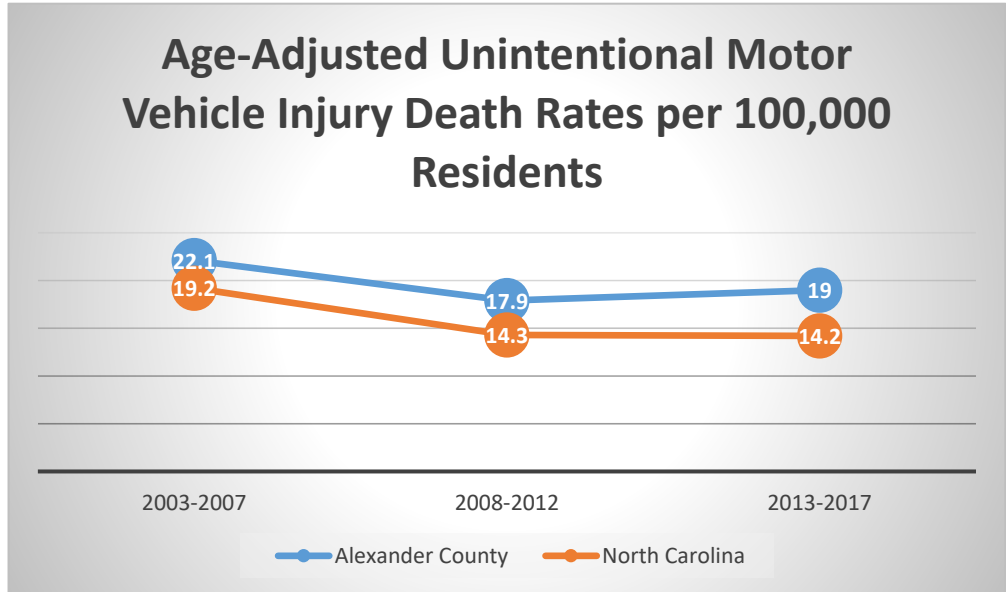
Emerging Issues

Motor Vehicle Deaths

In 2018, motor vehicle deaths entered the top ten leading causes of death among Alexander County residents for the first time in 3 years.

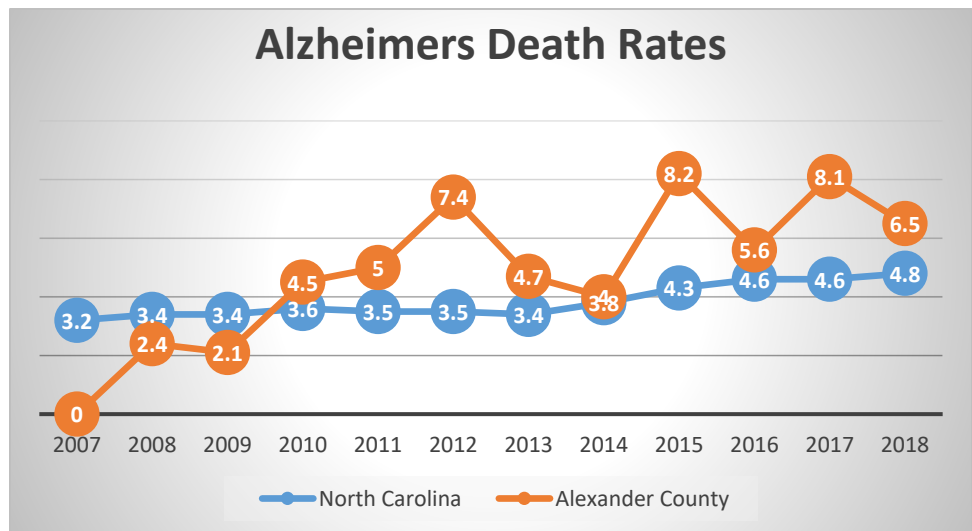
Drunk driving, texting while driving, speeding, and not wearing a seat belt are all risk factors for motor vehicle injury deaths. In 2019, Safe Kids Alexander conducted a “Don’t Text and Drive Campaign” with local high school students. The Health Department has begun the exploration of interventions to combat the increasing motor vehicle injury death rate in

Alexander County. The department also continues to work with other local agencies to address the reduction of risk factors through healthy lifestyle changes.



Alzheimer’s Disease

Noted in the 2014 CHA, the deaths associated with Alzheimer’s disease has shown an overall upward trend since 2007. Deaths related to Alzheimer’s disease saw a significant spike in 2015 before dropping again in 2016. However, the overall rate has remained higher than North Carolina’s average since 2010.



The cause of Alzheimer’s is currently unknown, although there has been proof of genetic links. There is also no cure. Alexander County residents prefer to age-in-place, and the county has become a retirement community in recent years. Currently, there are no support groups for caregivers. ACHD will continue to monitor this trend and evaluate possible interventions. Unfortunately, there are currently no intervention options. This will remain a constant with this aging demographic.

Changes Made

Consolidation & Progress

In 2017, the Board of County Commissioners voted to renovate an out-of-business bank into the new Alexander County Services Center. Opening in 2019, Alexander County Services Center houses the Tax Office, Soil and



Water, Parks and Recreation, Environmental Health, Building Inspections, Compliance Office, GIS, Register of Deeds, and Cooperative Extension. This move allowed the Health Department to expand. The Health Department administration moved to the adjacent building that formerly housed Soil and Water and Cooperative Extension. In May 2019, the Health Department expanding clinic rooms from two to five, and began to renovate offices to include the

new behavioral health program. WIC and immunization clinics received new placement within the building; this is to help with flow.

In July 2019, the Board of County Commissioners voted to consolidate Alexander County Health Department, Alexander County Senior Center, and Alexander County Department of Social Services. Leeanne Whisnant, formerly the Health Director of the Alexander County Health Department, is now the Alexander County Health and Human Services Director. Following the consolidation, the Board of Health was dismantled in favor of the Board of County Commissioners.



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 2019 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. In addition, at the Alexander County Administration Office located at 621 Liledoun Road in Taylorsville, and on the website at AlexanderHealth.org.

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