

North Carolina Health Reform Collaborative

Background

In a few short years, North Carolina policymakers and health care leaders have implemented significant, bipartisan health reforms that have made the state a leading national model for the shift from “paying for health care services” to “paying for health.” These reforms reflect strategies to make health care more person-centered, prevention-oriented, and affordable, with an emphasis on addressing the medical and social factors that contribute to worse outcomes and population health disparities. For example, the state has expanded Medicaid coverage, integrated behavioral and physical health, created new opportunities for Medicaid to pay for the underlying social and resource factors that affect people’s health and keep people well, and taken steps to reduce burdens on health care providers through more standard ways of sharing data and tracking progress. The net result is a time of tremendous opportunity for health and social care transformation.

The Duke-Margolis Institute for Health Policy has played a critical role in supporting the implementation of these important reforms. Duke-Margolis has a history of working across sectors to bring timely evidence to state leaders and stakeholders to address the most pressing health and social issues. Moreover, the Institute has become a trusted convener of public and private health care leaders across the state, which can encourage broader action.

Why This Work Matters

Through our work, we are supporting North Carolina in building an innovative and coordinated health care and social service system that rewards better health outcomes, integrates physical and behavioral health, and invests in non-medical interventions that reduce health care costs and respond to the needs of individuals and families across the state. We also are evaluating and reporting on this work to provide evidence to guide state-led health care reforms across the nation.

North Carolina is making progress, but health care transformation is a major, multi-year undertaking that our work has shown can benefit from sustained, strategic support. These initiatives continue to benefit from practical guidance to understand what is working and what is not, and engagement from the many organizations that are redesigning the way they support and deliver services to North Carolinians. Importantly, to improve health and affordability for all population groups, these multi-year reform efforts also require evidence and practical guidance on strategies to enable equitable access and health outcomes to address persistent and substantial disparities.

For example, Duke-Margolis can make a major impact on child and family health by building on the North Carolina Integrated Care for Kids model organized by Duke, and through our work to support the implementation of NC Medicaid’s innovative Healthy Opportunities Pilots to deliver more integrated care and supports for kids and families. These are important steps toward addressing children’s medical, social, and developmental needs; improving long-term outcomes for children and families; and reducing persistent and worsening disparities in maternal health outcomes, especially among Black and Indigenous women.

Duke-Margolis also aims to expand its work on care transformation in the state given shortages of primary care providers, clinician burnout, and opportunities to provide more coordinated and personalized health care. The Institute will identify how to advance reforms enabling clinicians to spend more time with patients, such as through streamlining administrative requirements and advancing electronic data standards; and to help primary care integrate more seamlessly with behavioral health care and specialty care. These reform initiatives will advance coordinated and effective health care payment and delivery reforms that break down siloed payment and delivery systems; alleviate provider burden, workforce burnout, and shortages; and reduce financial stressors currently facing many health care institutions.

Our Approach

The Duke-Margolis Institute for Health Policy is proposing a **North Carolina Health Reform Collaborative** to advance state health reform goals through:

- **Rapid response research and policy analysis** to help guide short-term decision-making by public and private leaders to achieve measurable progress on health equity and affordability,
- **Evaluation and evidence generation** to develop, assess, and improve effective and equitable payment and delivery reforms, and
- **Stakeholder engagement and education** to assure all perspectives and insights contribute to progress.

NC Health Reform Collaborative activities will expand our work in several key areas:

- Increasing the availability and integration of mental health and substance use services through innovative delivery models and infrastructure supports, leveraging the one-time [\\$1.6 billion](#) federal investment for improving behavioral health outcomes.
- Identifying opportunities to scale and spread care models that support advanced primary care coordination with specialty care and social services, with a particular emphasis on patients and families with complex needs and living in underserved communities.
- Advancing coordinated, whole-person health and social care for women and families through innovative payment and care delivery reforms that focus on coordinating care across the continuum of reproductive and pregnancy care, preventative care, chronic care, and family social supports to improve health outcomes over the course of life and reduce persistent disparities in access and outcomes across sociodemographic groups.

Finding Solutions

Through the NC Health Reform Collaborative, Duke-Margolis will leverage existing initiatives and develop new supports to inform progress, including:

- **NC Health Care Reform Executive Roundtable**—Launched by Duke-Margolis in 2019, the Roundtable brings together executive leaders from the NC Department of Health and Human Services, the NC Department of Information Technology, major health systems, primary care associations, health plans, and private business to translate shared interest into practical collaborative action in such areas as measuring and improving priority outcomes and reducing health care administrative burdens. The Roundtable is regarded by members and other stakeholders as an important resource to help inform and execute value-based payment and population health improvement strategies across the state. Leveraging the Executive Roundtable for the NC Health Reform Collaborative will facilitate the strategic vision and buy-in for interventions to advance health care transformation and health equity.

- **Sustainable Care Transformation for Healthier North Carolina**—Duke-Margolis is providing practical guidance for implementing and sustaining care transformation in a range of areas, including coordinated health care and social supports for high-risk children, strengthening primary care with integrated virtual services and care teams to improve chronic disease outcomes, and increasing the availability of behavioral health care through innovative delivery models. Additional support will enable us to expand these opportunities to improve health, reduce disparities, and make health care more affordable.
- **Community Advisory Council**—In 2023, with support from the Kate B. Reynolds Charitable Trust, Duke-Margolis established a Community Advisory Council to bring together community perspectives to understand the health-related needs of communities facing greater challenges accessing high-quality care. Our work to-date has helped demonstrate how meaningful engagement of community members and community-based organizations, and elevation of community voices and the voices of people with lived expertise, substantially affects the design, implementation, evaluation, and improvement of health care transformation activities. We intend to build on this collaborative approach in our further health reform work.
- **Preparing NC Next Generation Health Care Leaders**—Building on the Duke-Margolis established education mission, the NC Health Reform Collaborative will help expose and train North Carolina’s next generation of health policy leaders in critical policy topics through student and trainee engagement in assistantships, internships, or independent study.

Advance Our Work

Duke-Margolis has identified this portfolio as one of its emerging focus areas for 2024-2027. We are seeking funding to support new student initiatives and scholarships focused on state-based health care transformation, to expand Duke’s community of health policy researchers and faculty, and to establish a Duke Health Policy Action Fund that will provide start-up funds to support innovative health policy scholarship and solutions for the most pressing challenges for North Carolina and state-based health care collaboration strategies.

For more information on this work, please contact Rebecca Whitaker, Research Director, North Carolina Health Care Innovation and Medicaid Transformation at Rebecca.whitaker@duke.edu. For ways to support Duke-Margolis and the North Carolina Health Care Innovation and Medicaid Transformation portfolio, contact Morgan Pope, Director of Interdisciplinary Development, Duke University, at morgan.pope@duke.edu.