

State of the Community's Health

Ashe County | 2021



Promote. Prevent. Empower.

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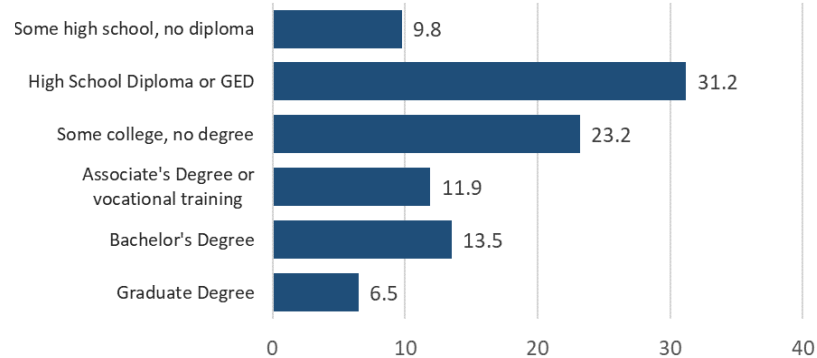
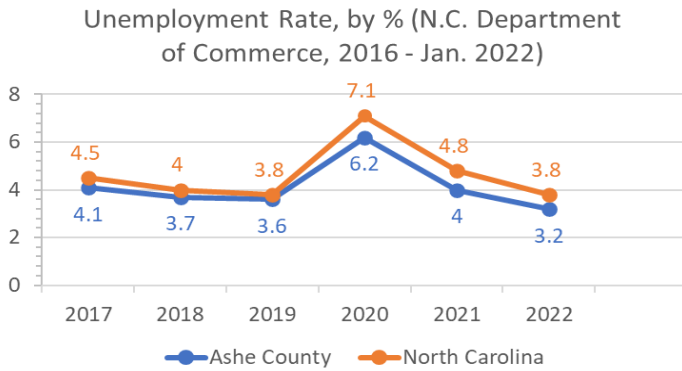
Overview and Demographics

In North Carolina, each local health department conducts a **Community Health Assessment (CHA)** every four years. AppHealthCare recently published the CHA in January 2022. During the years between community health assessments, health departments submit a **State of the County's Health (SOTCH) report**. In Ashe County, this report includes a summary of demographics, health indicators, and main causes of death. This report also contains updates on the community's top three health priorities, action plan projects, local initiatives and emerging trends.



Ashe County Demographics Snapshot Total Population 26,711 (US Census, 2021)

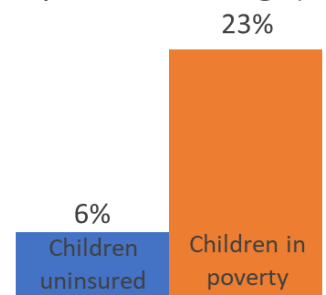
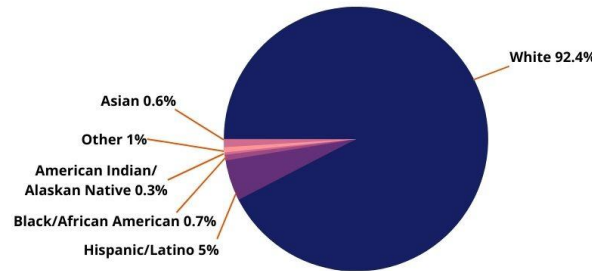
Educational Attainment, by % (U.S. Census Bureau 2020)



Median Household Income (U.S. Census Bureau, 2020)

Race Distribution (U.S. Census Bureau, 2020)

Poverty & the Uninsured, SAHIE County Health Rankings (2019)



Leading Causes of Death

(North Carolina County Health Data Book, 2019)

1. Cancer
2. Diseases of the Heart
3. Chronic Lower Respiratory Diseases
4. Cerebrovascular Disease

Leading Risk Factors

- Poor Nutrition
- Lack of Physical Activity
- Tobacco Use

Sharing the State of the Community's Health

Copies of this report may be found at www.apphealthcare.com. The report will be presented to community leaders and groups during different events. To learn more, follow us on Facebook at [AppHealthCare](https://www.facebook.com/AppHealthCare), log on to our website, and check your local radio and newspapers. To request more information or to schedule a presentation of this information for your group, call our Ashe County Health Center at 336.246.9449 or email info@apphealth.com.

About Public Health: Reaching for Health Equity and Resilience

AppHealthCare is committed to making sure that all people have full and equal access to opportunities that enable them to lead healthy lives.¹ In order to reach this vision of health equity, AppHealthCare is working to eliminate health disparities—differences in health outcomes among groups of people—that are created by social, economic, and environmental conditions. These conditions lead to behaviors such as smoking, poor nutrition, and lack of exercise, which affect our health.

Public Health Priorities

The Ashe Health Alliance and Community Health Assessment workgroup members selected the public health priorities in July 2021. These priorities were chosen based on the 2020 Ashe County Community Health Assessment. The public health priorities identified for Ashe County include mental and behavioral health, substance use and misuse prevention, and housing. Due to lack of momentum we have not moved forward with activities on housing. Conversations continue with community partners about how AppHealthCare can be involved.



¹Image source: <http://bipartisanpolicy.org/library/what-makes-us-healthy-vs-what-we-spend-on-being-healthy/>
<https://healthequity.sfsu.edu/>

Health Priority: Mental and Behavioral Health

Update to Local Community Objectives

Integrated Behavioral Health

Behavioral health describes the connection between behaviors and the wellbeing of the body, mind, and spirit. Behavioral health includes not only our mental health, but how our behaviors—such as eating habits or use of alcohol—impact our wellbeing. The number of adults with a serious mental illness in the U.S. has increased from 4.6 percent from 2017-2018 to 5.6 percent from 2019-2020. With the increase in mental illness, AppHealthCare’s Health Clinic in Ashe County continues to improve access to counseling, referral services, case management, and crisis management. One way this has been accomplished is by establishing a full time onsite Behavioral Health Consultant to provide integrated behavioral health.



Seeking primary healthcare is often the first step to accessing behavioral healthcare. Primary care providers are now moving toward a system of integrated care where both general and behavioral healthcare are provided. Integrating mental health and primary care services have been shown to produce the best outcomes for people with multiple healthcare needs. People with mental health and substance misuse disorders may die decades earlier than those without mental health or substance use disorders. This is mostly due to untreated and preventable chronic illnesses like hypertension, diabetes, obesity, and cardiovascular disease. Poor health habits such as lack of physical activity, poor nutrition, smoking, and substance misuse can worsen these chronic diseases. Trauma can also increase the risk of developing substance misuse, and substance misuse increases the likelihood that individuals will experience trauma. Building resilience in a community is a key strategy for addressing trauma and substance use.

Farmworker Health Program and Behavioral Health

The Farmworker Health Program (FHP) at AppHealthCare strives to improve the health of seasonal and migrant farmworkers in Ashe and Alleghany Counties. Farm work is a dangerous occupation as workers face threats to their physical and mental health. Farmworkers most times lack medical coverage, and face language and transportation barriers. Through the FHP, AppHealthCare works to address these barriers by providing translation and transportation services, as well as access and financial assistance for medical, dental, and behavioral health needs.

The Farmworker Health Program has been working on providing access to behavioral health services to farmworkers in Ashe and Alleghany Counties, and hopes to be able to provide a limited number of services internally in the coming months. Conversations continue around capacity of the behavioral health team to assist in providing services to both farmworkers and individuals with substance use disorders. Once a referral network is successfully established, we will track referrals served by the behavioral health team.

School Based Behavioral Health

AppHealthCare works with the Ashe School Health Advisory Council (SHAC) around student health, including disseminating the Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS). YRBS results are provided to the SHAC team to help influence resources provided to students. AppHealthCare's School Based Health Center reaches all middle school students in Ashe County and has an on-site Behavioral Health Clinician to work with youth. The Assessment, Support, & Counseling (ASC) Center is a valuable program that supports Ashe County School students in mental and behavioral health. As the school mental health program, the ASC Center works closely

with schools and local partners to prevent suicide. According to the 2019 North Carolina Youth Risk Behavior Survey, 36.3% of high school students reported that they felt sad or hopeless for two weeks or more in a row during the past 12 months, 18.9% of high school students considered attempting suicide, 15.4% of high school students and 16.3% of middle school students made a suicide plan, and 9.7% of high school students and 11.5% of middle school students attempted suicide. The following table outlines this data, collected in 2021, locally in Ashe County. More information through the NC Institute of Medicine about Youth Suicide & Suicide Attempts Rising in U.S. and N.C. can be found [here](#).

Where	During the past 12 months, did you ever seriously consider attempting suicide?	During the past 12 months, did you make a plan about how you would attempt suicide?	During the past 12 months, how many times did you actually attempt suicide? (one or more times)
Ashe County High School 2021 (n= 361 survey respondents)	11.4%	8.3%	5.3%
Ashe County High School 2019 (n= 695 survey respondents)	16.4%	11.6%	6.5%
Ashe County High School 2017 (n= 695 survey respondents)	14.2%	10.1%	6.1%
Ashe County High School 2014 (n= 615 survey respondents)	16.9%	13.8%	N/A
NC State Comparison (2019)	18.9%	15.4%	9.7%
National Comparison (2019)	18.8%	15.7%	8.9%

Where	Seriously thought about killing yourself, EVER	Have you EVER made a plan to kill yourself	Have you EVER tried to kill yourself
Ashe County Middle School 2021 (n= 582 survey respondents)	14.6%	9.8%	6.5%
Ashe County Middle School 2019 (6th grade: n= 218 survey respondents) (7th-8th grade: n= 352 survey respondents)	18.4% (6th grade) 25.7% (7th-8th grade)	8.3% (6th grade) 17.3% (7th-8th grade)	6.5% (6th grade) 14.3% (7th-8th grade)
Ashe County Middle School 2017 (n= 570 survey respondents)	19.6%	15%	7.4%
Ashe County Middle School 2011 (n= 450 survey respondents)	22.8%	15.2%	11%
NC State Comparison (2019)	23.4%	16.3%	11.5%

Distribution of Resource Cards

Ashe Health Alliance has a subgroup focused on Mental and Behavioral Health. This subgroup understands that high doses of early adversity significantly increase an individual's risk of suicide later in life. This subgroup has discussed working with the School Health Advisory Council (SHAC) to distribute a Survive and Thrive resource card to ensure that Ashe County's youngest citizens are aware of mental health services that are available to them. These cards would outline signs of serious distress, helpful tips for reducing stress, and a list of local and national crisis resources.

Ashe Youth Task Force

The Ashe Youth Task Force is a group led by Western Youth Network that collaborates with organizations in the area to provide educational resources and promote programming that corresponds with different problem areas that youth face. Lately, mental health has been the main topic of these meetings. The members all have agreed to work with the Systems of Care grant through Vaya and will focus on family/youth engagement and trauma/resilience. Additionally, task force members and Ashe County School staff have been partnering to develop calm corners in the schools to support behavioral regulation and resilience among students and faculty.

Mobile Crisis Management

Daymark Recovery Services offers Mobile Crisis Management services that provide a comprehensive crisis intervention in the least restrictive environment with a team perspective to meet any individual's needs. The service operates year-round, seven days per week, twenty-four hours per day.

National Alliance on Mental Illness

The [National Alliance on Mental Illness \(NAMI\)](#) is the nation's largest grassroots mental health organization dedicated to building better lives for the millions of Americans affected by mental illness. NAMI High Country, which includes Ashe County representation, wants to make the High Country a safer space for those experiencing mental illness by ending the stigma associated with it. NAMI High Country wants to ensure that those who need help have access to affordable care and support. NAMI High Country is here to facilitate recovery and resiliency for families and individuals and ultimately empower those who join us to be able to serve their community.

Health Priority: Substance Use and Misuse Prevention

Update to Local Community Objectives

North Carolina Opioid Action Plan

AppHealthCare has committed to the incorporation of the North Carolina Opioid Action Plan, evidence-based opioid and substance use prevention strategies, harm reduction tactics and methods, including safer syringe and naloxone distribution programs. These efforts are directly aligned with our mission and values to ensure the continuation of support for the identified Health Priority of Substance Use and Misuse Prevention determined through the Community Health Assessment and reviewed by coalitions within Ashe County. The NC Opioid Action Plan Objectives align with Ashe County's. These include the following:

Prevention

- Cutting supply of inappropriate prescriptions and illicit opioids
- Supporting youth through targeted programs to reduce youth misuse of the drugs
- Improving maternal and prenatal care for women battling substance abuse

Reducing Harm

- Making the naloxone kits more widely available to the most burdened communities

Connecting to Care

- Expanding access to treatment and recovery support
- Addressing the needs of justice-involved populations

A [data dashboard](#) developed by the NC Department of Health and Human Services helps to track and monitor the metrics in the Opioid Action Plan.

Peer Support Specialists

In 2019, AppHealthCare hired two part-time Peer Support Specialists (PSS). Then applied for the Community Linkages to Care grant that, once received, allowed for the support of an additional (full-time) PSS to serve the district. There are three PSS that work across the district. The PSSs work as advocates for those struggling with substance use disorder by relating on a personal level through lived experience to promote trust among the people they serve. The PSSs work to serve the community through education, prevention measures, harm reduction, training, connecting individuals to care, working with justice-involved individuals, and helping with environmental and policy change work.

Current PSS initiatives are being captured and evaluated using a combination of pre- and post-test comparisons and follow up with program participants and agencies, as well as maintenance of data logs. The following are measures that are in place and have been tracked since February 2019 (when the NC CPSS program started):

- Board of Health resolution to support comprehensive strategies to address the opioid epidemic
- Total number of individuals served by NC Peer Support Specialists (PSS) across Alleghany, Ashe, and Watauga Counties: **591**
- Total syringes returned: **51,932** (33,294 of those in Ashe County)
- Total naloxone kits distributed: **3,504** (2040 in Ashe County)
- Number of unique justice-involved persons served: **281** (131 in Ashe County)

- Number of justice-involved people and their families or loved ones educated on harm reduction strategies before release, including (but not limited to) training on how to recognize an overdose, how to administer naloxone, and how to prevent an overdose: **130**
- Number of justice-involved individuals reporting overdose reversals: **37**
- Percent of justice-involved individuals who are given access to naloxone upon release: **100% are offered - approximately 30% receive kits**
- Number of Narcan/Naloxone trainings in business and agencies: **13** (including ASU, community organizations, businesses, churches), **220 kits distributed to 184 participants**
- Number of average contacts with each individual served: **11**
- Number of individuals connected to medical, social services, emergency housing, transportation, food, treatment, behavioral health: **394**

Post-Overdose Response Team

Community collaboration is a key component of this strategy and having resources like the Post Overdose Response Team (PORT) that has been formed and is up and running in Ashe County. This is due to a partnership with Ashe Medics Community Paramedic Program and Ashe Memorial Hospital providing direct service to community members who have experienced an opioid overdose. AppHealthCare's PSS have responded to **60** PORT calls since the program began in November 2020, and other successes include:

- Number of naloxone kits distributed through PORT = 166
- Number of overdose reversals reported through PORT = 36

Medication-Assisted Treatment

AppHealthCare has a physician certified to provide Medication-Assisted Treatment (MAT) services to patients with a diagnosis of Opioid Use Disorder (OUD). Over the past two years, the Ashe clinic (of AppHealthCare) has developed and grown this program, working with AppHealthCare's Peer Support Specialists. MAT is the use of medications in combination with counseling and behavioral therapies for the treatment of OUDs. This combination of therapies has shown to be effective in the treatment of OUD and can help some people to sustain recovery.

E-Cigarette and Vaping Awareness in Schools

Youth use of tobacco products—in any form, including electronic nicotine delivery systems (ENDS) like e-cigarettes—is unsafe. Such products contain nicotine, which is highly addictive and can harm the developing adolescent brain. Using nicotine in adolescence may also increase risk for future addiction to other drugs. AppHealthCare is working alongside Western Youth Network & the Regional Tobacco Prevention and Control Manager to initiate talks with Ashe County Schools to implement the CATCH My Breath curriculum as well as to install vape detectors in school restrooms and locker rooms to further deter the use of electronic nicotine devices.

While the results of the YRBS reflect that the number of students who used a vape in the past 30 days has decreased, we are noticing an increased outreach by administrators that are looking for guidance around the increase in the amount of vaping use that they are currently witnessing in the schools. We are aiming to support ways to prevent and promote cessation with Ashe County students.

Medicaid Tobacco Free Policy

Starting December 1, 2022, North Carolina Standard and Tailored Prepaid Health Plans serving Medicaid and uninsured patients will require contracted medical, behavioral health, and some intellectual/developmental disabilities (IDD)/traumatic brain injury (TBI) organizations to provide a 100% tobacco-free campus. On September 7th, 2021, DHHS released a memo to providers advising them of the new tobacco-related policy

requirements going into effect December 2022. Daymark Recovery has begun to implement their tobacco-free campus policy and is working to make tobacco cessation part of the standard of care.

Live Vape Free NC

A media campaign aimed to help push vaping cessation among youth launched in Spring 2022. The campaign is called Live Vape Free and is a digital campaign that will target youth. The ads will drive those who click on the ad to a webpage where they can sign up to start the cessation program. This campaign runs in a ten county region.

CTTS Training

AppHealthCare staff continue to work with providers across the district to obtain Comprehensive Tobacco Treatment Training. There is also a newly trained faculty member at Ashe County Schools. This training through Duke-UNC aims to train health professionals to provide evidence-based treatment for tobacco use and dependence. The program provides an impactful education experience for a wide variety of professionals, including clinicians, nurses, pharmacists, social workers, public health policy-makers, and more.

Quitline

AppHealthCare staff is also able to offer Quitline services to clients by referring them through their online referral platform. QuitlineNC provides free cessation services to any North Carolina resident who needs help quitting commercial tobacco use, which includes all tobacco products offered for sale, not tobacco used for sacred and traditional ceremonies by many American Indian tribes and communities. Quit Coaching is available in different forms, which can be used separately or together, to help any tobacco user give up tobacco.

Emerging Issues and Other Initiatives

Food Access

Under our Healthy Communities strategy our goal is to increase the number of new community venues providing access to healthy foods and/or the number of existing community venues providing enhanced access to healthy foods. This includes new efforts for implementation as a result of COVID-19. Healthy foods are defined by the USDA as nutrient-dense foods across and within all food groups and are mentioned in the USDA's Dietary Guidelines for Americans 2020-2025.

Dr. Stroud at the AppHealthCare Dental Clinic is working with a community member on a community garden that produces fresh produce to distribute at a food pantry for WIC recipients and the Migrant Farmworker population. Stroud hopes to address the food insecurity she witnesses in some of her dental patients and local families. With the help of partnerships, resources, energy and patience, she operates the AppHealthCare Community Dental Garden, which in 2020 yielded 360 pounds of produce and gave 70 families access to healthy food.

MedSouth

The MedSouth program is an opportunity that AppHealthCare received in 2021 to partner with Wake Area Health Education Center that focuses on healthy eating with inspiration from the Mediterranean Diet. This is a nutrition based program with the primary outcome objectives of improving blood pressure and weight loss. While this program is based on the principles of the Mediterranean Diet, it has been adapted to be more accessible to the southern population. Participants in Ashe County were given the opportunity to be part of this program that consisted of 4 sessions across 4 months, and could receive up to \$120 if they completed all three surveys they were asked to complete.

Drug Users Health Program

In 2019, AppHealthCare's Recovery Peer Support Specialists started collaborating and volunteering with Olive Branch Ministry to provide harm reduction resources and services to Ashe County residents and businesses. These resources and services include increased availability of Narcan/Naloxone and training, and safer supplies for drug users. AppHealthCare also collaborates with Olive Branch Ministry to receive TA and fulfill requirements of the Community Linkages to Care grant, which is a grant to help to increase access to care and working with justice-involved individuals.

Advancing Equity Initiative

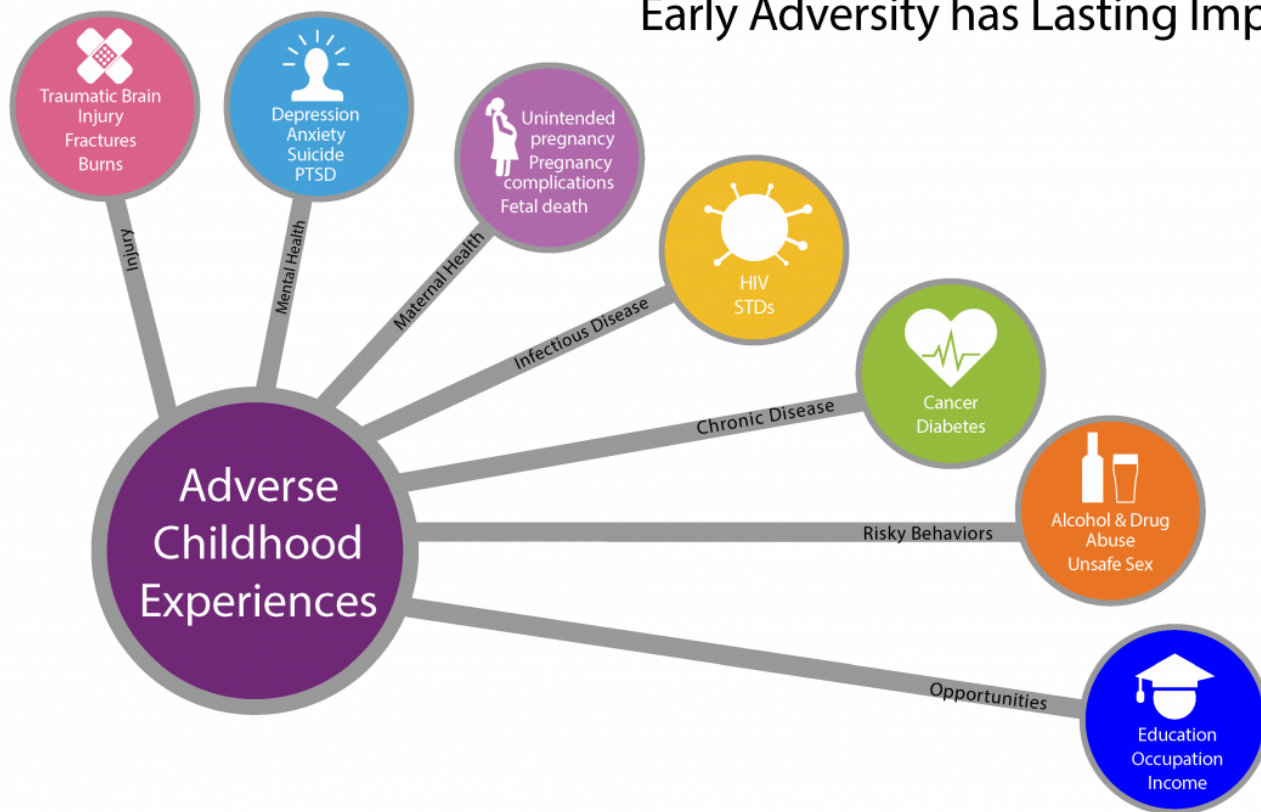
In 2021, AppHealthCare received a new opportunity to focus efforts on health equity for Historically Marginalized Populations (or HMPs). Under this initiative, AppHealthcare staff have reconvened the Equity Performance Improvement Team (or PIT) to guide internal efforts to improve agency policies and practices towards health equity, particularly regarding COVID-19 prevention and mitigation. The Advancing Equity initiative will also involve external efforts to engage community partners to collaboratively improve COVID-19 infection outcomes and as well as other long-term outcomes that disproportionately impact HMPs.

Family & Social Supports

Adverse Childhood Experiences

Many health disparities begin early in life with [Adverse Childhood Experiences \(ACEs\)](#). ACEs are potentially traumatic events that can have negative, lasting effects on health and well-being. These experiences range from physical, emotional, or sexual abuse to parental divorce or the imprisonment of a parent. Initiatives such as the Positive Parenting Program and other family interventions through the Partnership of Ashe and the Ashe County Schools are successful at addressing these challenges because they address the whole person in the context of our relationships and local environment.

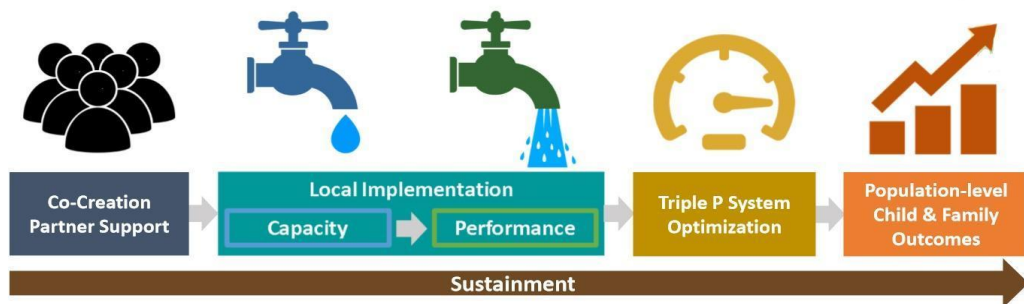
Early Adversity has Lasting Impacts



Family Based Intervention: Family Connects
 Through a collaboration between AppHealthCare and the Children’s Council of Watauga County, Family Connects International Nurse Home Visiting Program has expanded into Ashe County to increase child well-being by helping connect families with newborns to community resources.

Using the Family Support Matrix, home visiting nurses assess the well-being of the mother, father, and infant by asking questions regarding general health, infant care, safety, social and emotional support needs, and more. All families in Ashe County are eligible for one home visit by a registered nurse to all parents of newborns up to 12 weeks old born in the service area, up to two additional home visits from the nurse home visitor for families who need additional support, and referrals to resources and services as needed. Family Connects staff have been recruiting at Ashe Memorial Hospital since October of 2021 when staff resumed home visits. As of April 2022, we are seeing a significant increase in post visit referrals completed, meaning that families are being connected successfully to the resources they need.

Family Based Intervention: Positive Parenting Program
 Ashe County practitioners continue to implement positive parenting strategies in hopes of reducing serious negative childhood outcomes. Healthy children equal



healthy adults later in life. How do we know that the Positive Parenting Program is working locally? The program is showing high approval scores from families. Improved child behavior and decreased parent stress is being reported based on Client Satisfaction Questionnaires received. The Triple P Team is working with partners and practitioners to consistently collect this data to ensure that important feedback loop is sustained.