

State of the Community's Health

Watauga County | 2021



Promote. Prevent. Empower.

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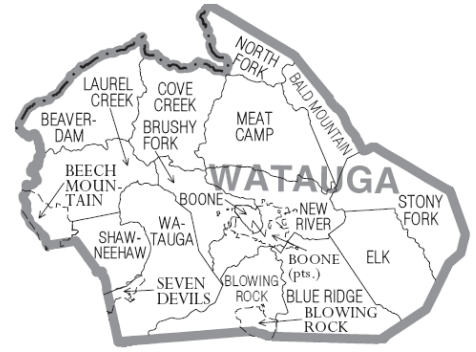
Watauga County Health Center

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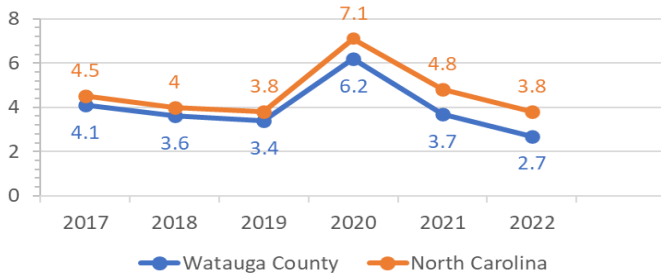
Overview and Demographics

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 Watauga 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.

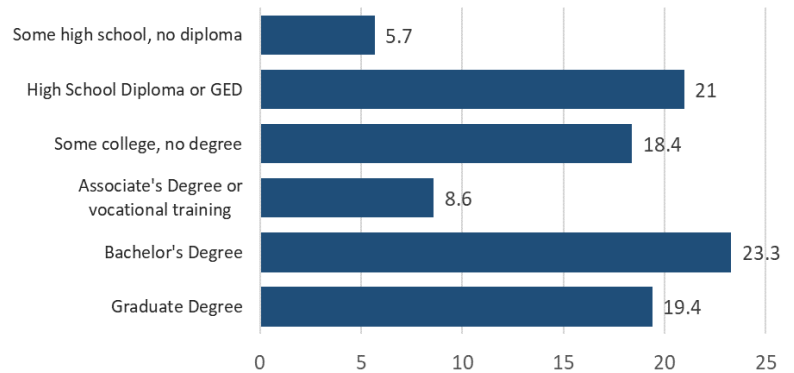


Watauga County Demographics Snapshot Total Population 54,234 (US Census, 2021)

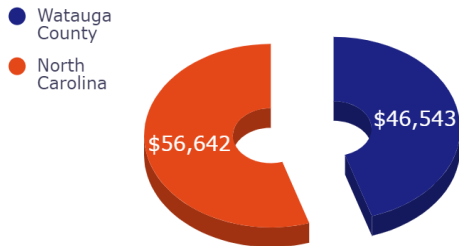
Unemployment Rate, by % (N.C. Department of Commerce, 2016 - Jan. 2022)



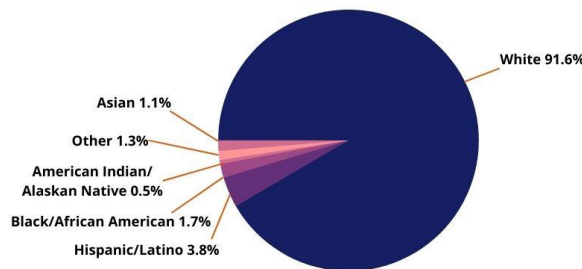
Educational Attainment, by % (U.S. Census Bureau 2020)



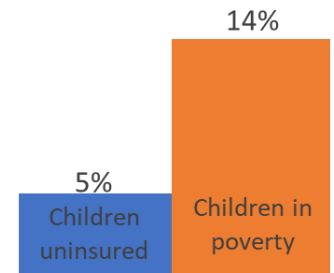
Median Household Income (U.S. Census Bureau, 2020)



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. Alzheimer's Disease
4. Chronic Lower Respiratory Diseases

Leading Risk Factors

- Tobacco Use
- Lack of Physical Activity
- Poor Nutrition

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 Watauga County Health Center at 828.264.4995 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, Watauga County 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 Watauga Compassionate Community Initiative collaborative, which focuses on promoting health and resiliency in our community and to effectively prevent, recognize, and treat trauma by creating safe, stable, nurturing environments and relationships, selected the health priorities in August 2021. These priorities were chosen based on the 2020 Watauga County Community Health Assessment. The public health priorities identified for Watauga County include mental and behavioral health, family and social support, and housing.

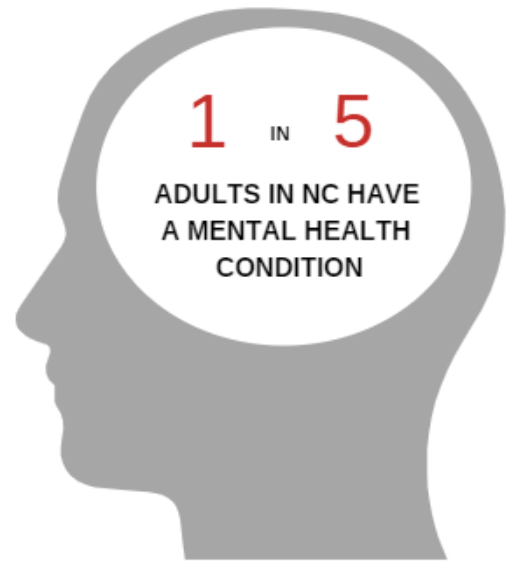
¹Image source: <http://bipartisanpolicy.org/library/what-makes-us-healthy-vs-what-we-spend-on-being-healthy/>
<https://healthequity.sfsu.edu/>

Health Priority: Mental and Behavioral Health

Update to Local Community Objectives

Community Mental Health Project

The Community Mental Health Project (CMHP) is a Watauga-based coalition made up of agency leaders, clinicians, faith leaders, law enforcement and others who want to improve quality of life and prevent loss of life related to mental health issues. With such a diverse group participating in this effort, the target population of this group ranges significantly and many projects are directed towards the general population of Watauga County. The latest activity of the Community Mental Health Project involved producing a comprehensive website of local resources and continuing to facilitate honest conversations around mental health to reduce stigma. The group is exploring ways to connect the resources website with NCCare360, the statewide referral network. Additionally, the group is planning an event to roadmap mental health in Watauga County. This event will address gaps and barriers to accessing mental health locally.



Behavioral Health Interventions

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, Watauga County continues to improve access to counseling, referral services, case management, and crisis management.

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, substance misuse, and primary care services has 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.

School Based Behavioral Health

AppHealthCare works with the Watauga 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. The Assessment, Support, & Counseling (ASC) Center is a valuable program that supports Watauga 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 Watauga 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)
Watauga High School 2021 (n= 1028 survey respondents)	15.7%	11.5%	6.5%
Watauga High School 2018 (n= 870 survey respondents)	15.4%	9.8%	6.1%
Watauga High School 2016 (n= 909 survey respondents)	15.5%	11.9%	5.8%
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
Watauga Middle School 2021 (n= 818 survey respondents)	13.2%	10.2%	4.1%
Watauga Middle School 2018 (n= 872 survey respondents)	17.2%	12.3%	6.1%
NC State Comparison (2019)	23.4%	16.3%	11.5%

Distribution of Resource Cards

The Watauga School Health Advisory Council (SHAC) understands that high doses of early adversity significantly increase an individual’s risk of suicide later in life. The group has discussed distributing a Survive and Thrive resource card to ensure that Watauga 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.

Watauga Substance Action and Prevention

Watauga Substance Action and Prevention is a data-driven, evidence-based, multi-sector coalition with a goal to reduce youth substance use and abuse in Watauga County, North Carolina. WSAP utilizes the Seven Strategies for Effective Community Change and the Drug-Free Communities Model. The areas of focus are alcohol, tobacco and prescription medications. They continue to study the data procured by the YRBS and how it relates to the youth mental health and substance use in Watauga County Schools. Alongside this, they actively perform alcohol purchase surveys in the community which lessens the chance of youth being able to purchase alcohol without having a valid ID.

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.

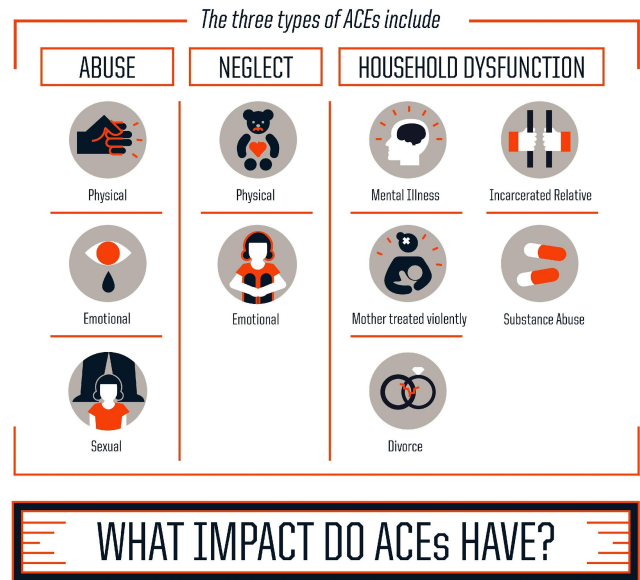
National Alliance on Mental Illness

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 Watauga 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: Family & Social Support

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. ACEs are also associated with chronic, long-term health issues such as chronic stress and diabetes. Initiatives such as the Positive Parenting Program, Family Connects home visiting program, and the Watauga Compassionate Community Initiative are successful at addressing these challenges because they address the whole person in the context of our relationships and local environment.



Update to Local Community Objectives



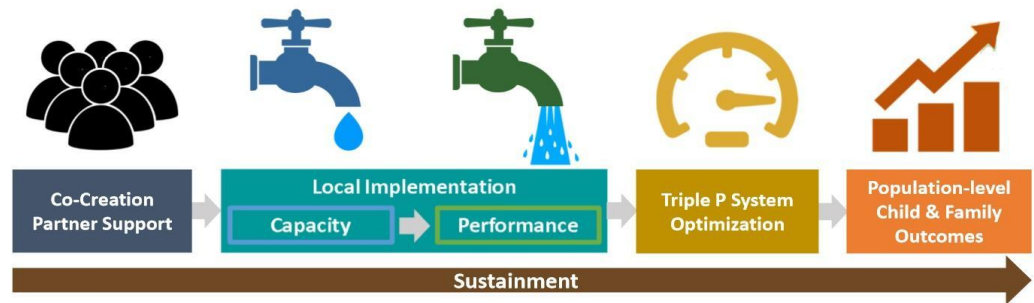
Family Based Intervention: Family Connects

Through a collaboration between AppHealthCare and the Children’s Council of Watauga County, Family Connects International Nurse Home Visiting Program continues 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 Watauga 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 Watauga Medical Center 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

Watauga 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

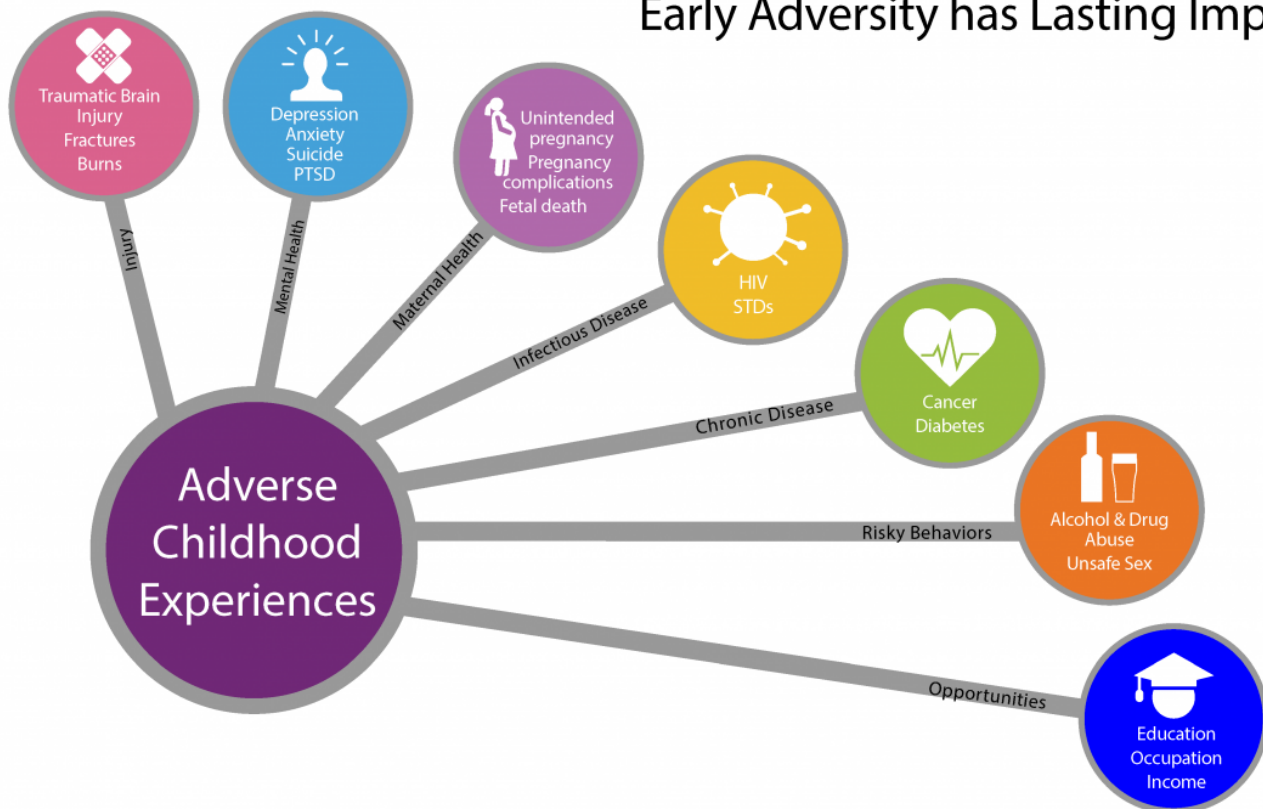


approval scores from families. Improved child behavior and decreased parent stress is being reported based on Client Satisfaction Questionnaires received. The Triple P Team is working with partners and practitioners to consistently collect this data to ensure that important feedback loop is sustained.

Building Community Resilience/Resilience Catalysts

AppHealthCare was selected in 2019 to partner with George Washington University, National Association of County and City Health Officials (NACCHO), and American Public Health Association (APHA) as a Chief Health Strategist, or Resilience Catalysts site, to push forward initiatives that address the Pair of ACEs. Resilience Catalysts foster integration of cross-sector and community services and community-wide prevention by leveraging a public health approach to prevent the Pair of ACEs with a focus on adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), opioid misuse, and suicide. One of AppHealthcare's focus areas for the Resilience Catalysts project is employment because we know that economic stability leads to improved health outcomes for individuals and their families. AppHealthcare is working with Watauga Compassionate Community Initiative (WCCI) and other partners to design a toolkit for businesses to become trauma-informed. This resource will help businesses to better support their employees in a variety of ways.

Early Adversity has Lasting Impacts



Health Priority: Housing

Update to Local Community Objectives

Watauga Housing Forum

Issues related to housing can impact community members in a variety of ways, including impacting long-term health outcomes. A diverse group of community members and key agencies have come together to take action on the increasingly complex topic of housing in Watauga County. The group hosted a four-session series to discuss the safety, accessibility, and affordability of housing in Watauga. Each session featured community members sharing their personal housing experiences. Participants reviewed key local housing data among participants.



The Housing Forums led to the creation of the Watauga Housing Council which has recently completed a draft Community Action Plan.

Watauga Housing Council

Through a careful voting process based on the criteria of value, reach, leverage, and specificity, the following actions have been selected as the most powerful actions to turn the curve on housing in Watauga:

- Ordinance to allow for tiny-home & RV home communities
- Zoning Code Change/Incentive Program
- Renovate publicly-owned property, not being used, for affordable housing
- Town/county incentives/supports to property owners to rehab housing for affordable rentals
- Individual church-led housing initiatives (ie. Caldwell Presbyterian/Open Hearts Place)

In August 2022, the Housing Council will form committees and determine initial action steps.

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. Programs such as the High Country Food Hub operated by Blue Ridge Women in Agriculture are making the availability of fresh food and produce more accessible to those who are in more rural parts of the county. They now have satellite pick up locations in Vilas/Zionville and Deep Gap. We are also supporting outreach efforts for the Double Up Food Buck program which matches your SNAP/EBT dollars so you get twice the amount of fruits and veggies.



The Watauga Farmers Market opened early this season at the beginning of April. They have expanded their hours until 1pm every Saturday allowing more people to be able to attend. Located at Horn in the West, the market is continuously growing and AppHealthCare is supporting efforts to optimize operations. A connection has also been made between the market and Q'Pasa Appalachia in hopes that the market will be more accessible to the Latino community. Plans include creating more Spanish signage as well as potentially hosting a Latin day at the market.

F.A.R.M. Full Circle is a food recovery and redistribution program of F.A.R.M. Cafe. They collect imperfect fruits and vegetables, over-ordered food items, and other products at risk of going to waste from local grocers, farmers, and small businesses. Each week, volunteers prepare ready-to-eat meals, meal kits, and other value-added products using recovered foods. Products are distributed in two ways. Primarily they distribute fresh produce, prepared meals, and meal kits to nonprofit and faith-based organizations serving food insecure individuals. A weekly selection of meals and side dishes are also available on a donate-what-you-can basis at F.A.R.M. Cafe and High Country Food Hub. AppHealthcare has been able to support F.A.R.M. Cafe with materials for a new prep kitchen in their building, which will add much needed capacity to their outreach efforts.

The Watauga Food Access and Security Workgroup is continuing to find innovative ways to connect with those in the community surrounding this topic. Currently the workgroup is working on a skill share series. Potential topics include gardening, bulk food prep, fermentation, edible landscaping and nutrition. These skill share series opportunities will be free and the limited spots would be given to those who could benefit the most from in the community.

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 Watauga 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.