

Methodology

The Coastal Carolinas Health Alliance (CCHA) Regional Needs Assessment contains primary data from residents of nine counties within North Carolina and northeastern South Carolina. The data was obtained through surveys and health forums conducted throughout the year 2007-2008. The primary data provides qualitative measurements of the communities' health and health care needs, in an effort to identify health disparities that can be addressed and corrected in order to improve the health of the region as a whole.

An ideal community needs assessment encompasses the perspectives of all members of the community. Representation from key leaders, services providers, various church and civic groups, all races, genders and generations are necessary to complete a flawless assessment. In order to meet those demands, a standardized survey was developed and mailed to key leaders within each of the nine counties. These surveys are designed to be distributed randomly throughout the community in order to get a clear "community perspective" of disparities as viewed by community members as a whole. Surveys were distributed at health fairs, senior activities, grocery and convenience stores, and other places in some of the counties. A standardized list of focus group questions was developed and used in focus groups conducted by CCHA's Community Health Team in various communities within each of the nine counties. This data is incorporated into the individual county assessments for those in which they were conducted. This information identifies what the community residents' view as healthcare strengths and weaknesses within the community as well as the major changes they feel are necessary to facilitate the improvement of the community's health. As a result, this assessment will aid in determining how to best address these needs and allocate resources.

In an effort to solicit more responses to the Needs Assessment surveys, CCHA has implemented an online version of the survey in both English and Spanish for each participating county within the Alliance. CCHA put an online version into practice as a pilot initiative with the hopes that the individual links can be mailed out over listservs across the region, reaching those who otherwise may not have received a paper copy. Additionally, with the age of technology that so many are aboard, the Alliance hopes that this online option will be more enticing to some Internet and computer savvy demographics. A survey URL is far easier to distribute than a hardcopy piece of paper. As such, the Alliance will use the online survey responses as supplemental data alongside the 500 paper copies that were distributed throughout each participating county within the region.

This assessment is also made up of secondary data retrieved from various sources such as the North Carolina State Center for Health Statistics and South Carolina Department of Health and Environmental Control, among others. The databases that will be used to collect this information contain publicly available statistics with no health identifiers. This data will provide quantitative measurements of the community's general health with regards to mortality/morbidity, chronic disease prevalence, STD prevalence, birth rates, teenage pregnancy rates, education, poverty level, etc. Due to the fact that the region is

made up of counties contained in both North and South Carolina and the fact that two separate state sources were used, there is some variation in the data obtained for North Carolina versus South Carolina counties. All of the data obtained for North Carolina counties was not able to be duplicated by the South Carolina data sources and therefore direct county comparisons for the regional assessment in some areas was not feasible and is reflected in several of the data tables herein. The regional needs assessment and plan was formulated by taking a global look at the data contained within each of the individual county health assessments, formulating regional tabulations and then determining what the most prominent health disparities are and where the majority exist within the region of southeastern North Carolina and northeastern South Carolina.

The primary community partner involved in this assessment is the CCHA's Community Health Improvement Team lead by Colin O'Sullivan, Director of Business Development and Corporate Negotiations. CCHA is a non-profit organization comprised of eleven member hospitals located in southeastern North Carolina and northeastern South Carolina. CCHA was established approximately seventeen years ago. The purpose of this organization is to "provide a cooperative forum for improving the quality and delivery of health care to the citizens of southeastern North Carolina and northeastern South Carolina" (Coastal Carolinas Health Alliance, 2003, About Us, pgh 1.)

The Community Health Team's mission is to establish a replicable disease management model through coordinated collaboration with key stake holders in an effort to reduce morbidity and mortality in the region. Representatives are from each of the eleven member hospitals and may also serve as their county's local Healthy Carolinians coordinator. All nine of the North Carolina counties within the Alliance are certified through the North Carolina Governor's Talk Force as Healthy Carolinians Partnerships. Horry County is located in South Carolina and thus, is not a certified partner. Healthy Carolinians is a North Carolina state initiative that South Carolina does not currently support. "The Governor's Task Force on Healthy Carolinians awards certification to communities who have established broad based community partnerships which represent the needs of the disadvantaged and whose mission is prevention based" (Healthy Carolinians, 1992-2002, Certification Process, pgh 1.) The community partnerships are made up of residents of communities of varying socioeconomic levels and ethnic ties, representation from government agencies, and leaders in the community as well as members from different organizations such as churches, schools and private businesses. In order to maintain Healthy Carolinians certification, communities must perform needs assessments every four years to evaluate the health status and needs of the community and their capacity for improvement. The needs assessment is organized through the CCHA's Community Health Team. With the residents' involvement, they must establish priorities determined from the findings and develop a plan of action aimed at reducing the health disparities. The partnership then informs the public of its findings and strategies for improvement, charging the community with taking an active role in improving their health. The common goal shared by both the Coastal Carolinas Health Alliance and Healthy Carolinians is improving the health of the communities they serve.