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**From Matthew Chamberlin**  
Associate Dean for Communications and Marketing

This issue's cover, third in a series of collectible artwork by the artist Brittain Peck, depicts the myriad ways public health made all our lives better today, in ways you may not have even realized. One of the things we love about Brittain's artwork is the "Easter eggs" that are sprinkled throughout his drawings. Even after repeated viewings, you often see something you didn't see before. Clean air and water, healthy families, food that is safe to eat ... these are just a few examples. What public health pillars did you notice?



*“Public health is not just a field – it is a promise. A promise that, no matter how the world changes, there will always be people working to keep others safe, healthy and empowered.”*

## From the Dean

Every day, in ways seen and unseen, public health shapes the world around us. It's in the air we breathe, the water we drink and the systems that protect us when we are most vulnerable. Whether it's reducing the spread of infectious diseases, designing safer cities or creating health education programs that empower communities to make informed choices, public health saves lives – quietly and consistently.

You may not always notice it, but public health is a constant presence in your daily life. It's the seatbelt you buckle, the green space where you walk to clear your mind, the vaccines that protect your parents from the flu and the healthy lunch your children eat at school. It's the policies that prevent our exposure to toxic chemicals and the research that improves our odds against chronic disease.

Public health can look like free mental health services for veterans or a mobile dental clinic that travels to rural areas. It ranges from training police officers to administer a drug that reduces overdose deaths to implementing a standard check-up that can save a new mother's life.

And yes, public health is there in emergencies, too. It's in the rapid response to hurricane destruction, the sanitation plans made for refugee camps and the clear communication shared with parents about a virus outbreak at school.

At the UNC Gillings School of Global Public Health, we believe that now, more than ever, public health matters. In a world marked by complex challenges, public health is the force that brings science, compassion and action together to protect and improve the well-being of all people.

We are committed to training the public health leaders of tomorrow to be savvy innovators, bold leaders and thoughtful collaborators. Our programs cultivate problem-solvers who know how to navigate uncertainty and meet the needs of many different populations, wherever they may be.

We train students to embrace both flexibility and dedication because public health is not just a field – it is a promise. A promise that, no matter how the world changes, there will always be people working



to keep others safe, healthy and empowered. It is this promise that motivates us to study, to teach and to serve with unwavering purpose.

In this issue of *Carolina Public Health*, you will read about the countless ways public health saves lives every day, and how it will safeguard our future. From innovative research and community-driven programs to groundbreaking policies and transformative partnerships, these stories capture the heart of our mission.

Public health is here for you, for your family, for your community and for the world. And it will be here tomorrow, too. 📖

**Dr. Nancy Messonnier**

Dean and Bryson Distinguished Professor in Public Health  
UNC Gillings School of Global Public Health



### Journey through Public Health

Learn how public health saves lives every day – and has been saving lives for centuries – in our new Journey through Public Health video series!



# Public health made your life better today ...

... and there's a good chance  
it went unnoticed.

Have you ever stopped in the middle of a daily task – commuting to work, cooking dinner, spending time with family or friends – and thought about just how many ways public health helped it happen? Probably not.



*Working from home?* Public health ensures that indoor air is free of harmful chemicals and water is safe to drink when you turn on the tap.

*Going for a walk?* Public health keeps pollution at bay and contributes to the design of walkways that are safe and accessible.

*Driving to the store?* Public health policies keep you safe in your car, keep lead out of your gasoline and show you ingredients in the food you buy.

Public health works in the liminal spaces and in the conscious choices we make each day: sending our kids to school with healthy food, taking daily medication or casting a ballot in a voting booth.

It also works in the communities and foundations of our society: the vaccines that have controlled diseases that once haunted our ancestors, the research that has uncovered the harms of tobacco or the technology that ensures our water is safe to drink.

It's an ecosystem of ourselves, our neighbors, our health care providers and our governments. The

greatest innovations in public health history are still benefiting us today, and the UNC Gillings School of Global Public Health has proudly contributed to those achievements.

And as you'll see in this issue of *Carolina Public Health*, we're still leading the charge in so many of these areas. The Gillings School is responding to natural disasters outside our doorstep, bringing a safety net of health and community in the face of storms and floods. We're informing the design of warning labels on everything from cigarettes to junk food. We're researching the best policies that can keep families healthy before, during and after pregnancy. And so much more.

Public health shines each time health improves and crises are averted. We are working hard behind the scenes so that you can have more moments with your family, more time to enjoy your hobbies and more facts to make informed choices. We are the silent partner constantly striving to make life better for all ... even if you never notice. 🗑️



## HEALING FROM HELENE:

# Gillings community helps Western NC recover from historic storm

In the weeks after the most devastating hurricane Western North Carolina had ever seen, Gillings School faculty and students were among the thousands of volunteers involved in relief efforts – from providing guidance on safely feeding babies to disposing of debris, to working in crisis call centers, to helping families clean up their flood-damaged homes. Recovery, though, will be a years-long effort, and the School has an ongoing role to play as Western N.C. rebuilds.

### ASSISTANCE FROM AFAR

When Hurricane Helene hit the western part of the state Sept. 27, 2024, it left a trail of unprecedented devastation in its wake. Communications were cut off; roads and highways crumbled; and rushing floodwaters swept away people, their possessions, even their cars and homes. In the immediate aftermath, public officials asked people who wanted to help to refrain from traveling to Western N.C. because of washed-away roads and other safety concerns. Gillings faculty and staff began leveraging their public health networks and contacts to find ways the School could help from afar.

Through these networks, Gillings School faculty and staff found opportunities to lean in. They partnered with the Western N.C. Health Communicators Collaborative on communications about roughly 40 hurricane impact health issues, including drinking water, safe clean up, road safety, advice for pregnant persons, environmental concerns with mold, burning debris and other issues. They also helped support UNC's Center for Public Service, the main resource for coordinating UNC's disaster response, and organized volunteers to serve in a call center for the Crisis Cleanup Hotline, which connects disaster survivors who need property cleanup assistance with volunteer organizations.



Volunteers from the Gillings School and the local community clear debris from a creek in Fairview, N.C., one of many flood-affected areas hit hard by Hurricane Helene.

"These were some things we could help with from a distance," said [John Wiesman, DrPH, MPH](#), professor of the practice, associate dean for practice and the director of the School's doctoral program in Public Health Executive Leadership (DrPH).

### SAFELY FEEDING YOUNG FAMILIES

A few days after the storm, a network of nutritionists, lactation consultants and others – mobilized in large part by former and current leaders of the N.C. Breastfeeding Coalition who live in Western N.C. – gathered in Asheville to assemble and deliver hundreds of infant feeding and cleaning kits for families lacking power, water, critical supplies and shelter. The group also trained volunteers and local organizations on how to keep infants eating safely after a disaster, promoted breastfeeding as a safe practice, and established milk banks in stricken communities.

Assistant Nutrition Professor [Heather Wasser, PhD](#), who volunteered in October with the Coalition's Support and Advocacy for Infant Feeding in Emergencies Team (SAFE Team), said studies show that in times of disaster, diarrhea and infant morbidity worsen when there are mass distributions of formula,

especially when it's not paired with information about how to safely prepare it. "So what we really wanted to do was not just give out these kits but to really interface with families and pair our deliveries with counseling and try to find any opportunity we could to promote breastfeeding as the safest way to feed," she said.

Assistant Nutrition Professor [Stephanie Martin, PhD](#), along with nutrition doctoral students [Ivonne Headley](#) and [Doreen Alumaya](#), volunteered on the ground in November, as the colder weather posed new challenges. "A lot of distribution sites were storing formula outside, and powdered formula is not supposed to get cold," Martin said. "We organized their supplies, got rid of expired formula, and spent time educating site staff about safe formula storage and distribution."

In partnership with the Breastfeeding Coalition, the Carolina Global Breastfeeding Institute at Gillings (a longtime member organization of the coalition) offered technical assistance and resources, created infant feeding and emergencies online modules and a training manual for SAFE Team leaders, offered continuing education credits for volunteers who completed training, collaborated on grant and presentation submissions, and provided hands-on assistance



*“Recovery in some people’s minds is the first couple of weeks after a storm. But from the public health perspective and from a systems level, that’s going to take years.”*

**John Wiesman, DrPH, MPH**

at Western N.C. distribution sites. Additionally, as part of the Mary Rose Tully Training Initiative, an accredited lactation training program housed in the Department of Maternal and Child Health, students **Elizabeth Abt**, **Katie Hume**, and Master of Public Health (MPH) candidate **Hannah Larson** volunteered alongside CGBI and SAFE Team members, including MPH candidate **Linels Higuera Ancidey**. CGBI faculty and staff also are working closely with the nutrition department on research studies to evaluate the impact of the SAFE Team response.

## DISASTER RESPONSE TRAINING AT GILLINGS

Hurricane Helene was a common topic in this year’s Gillings on the Ground, a two-semester training program open to anyone interested in learning more about disaster response and emergency management. One session on crisis response strategies included Appalachian State University students who shared their experiences during the storm and in the days, weeks and months afterward.

“It was eye opening and just scary to think about what they lived through,” said Gillings on the Ground coordinator **Ariella Tal**, an MPH student from Charlotte. “It also made us realize that we were unprepared and that we don’t want to be unprepared again. So the session was a very approachable way to talk about different aspects of the emergency response cycle and get a base foundation on steps people can take to be more prepared in the future.”

For students in the UNC Asheville-UNC Gillings MPH program, Helene had a more direct impact – and



Nutrition doctoral student Doreen Alumaya, MPH, IBCLC, assembles SAFE Infant Feeding Sanitation Kits to distribute to families affected by Helene.

more direct opportunities to help and learn. With their classes at Asheville’s Mountain Area Health Education Center campus either paused or moved online, students contributed to Helene recovery efforts in Buncombe, Henderson and Yancey counties, either as part of their full-time public health jobs or on a volunteer basis. Thanks to their classes, they knew the importance of understanding what people need and using real-time information, said **Sarah Thach, MPH**, program co-director and Gillings School assistant professor. “Rapid assessment is something we talk about,” Thach said. “Listening to community members and hearing what the needs are. Not coming in assuming that you know what the needs are but, instead, drawing on local expertise.”

## ‘YOU JUST CANNOT IMAGINE...’

**Bill Gentry, MPH**, professor of health policy and management and director of the School’s Community Preparedness and Disaster Management certificate program, has broad expertise in leading relief and recovery efforts from his 15 years at the N.C. Division of Emergency Management. He took two groups of students to Western N.C. to help rural communities rebuild.

“As we drove in, the van got really quiet,” Gentry recalled of the first trip. “Most of them had not seen that type of damage before and just did not relate that landscape to what a natural disaster can do and how it affects people. Sometimes you just cannot imagine that

a small stream that you can literally step over now, at some point was a 30-foot raging stream of water that literally swept people’s houses away into the woods.”

In Fairview, a rural area outside of Asheville, Gentry’s group worked with a small community that had lost three houses, along with its main road. On Saturday, they sifted through debris piles looking for personal items that were still in good enough condition to be reunited with their owners. Sunday, they cleaned out a community barn estimated to be about 200 years old, which had been filled with mud as the floodwaters passed through.

“We got there at a pretty good time because it wasn’t hazardous to be there, but there was still a lot of work to be done,” said **Parmis Kimia**, a senior economics student at UNC who is part of the certificate program. “We got to see these things we were learning about in person – for example, seeing that it’s not easy to stick to a disaster relief plan, and that there is a lot of improvisation and fitting in where you can.”

## ADDRESSING COMMUNITY CONCERNS

As director of UNC’s Superfund Research Program (UNC-SRP), **Rebecca Fry, PhD**, the Carol Remmer Angle Distinguished Professor in Children’s Environmental Health and chair of environmental sciences and engineering, is steering a multi-faceted environmental response to assist communities affected by Helene, working closely with local government officials and community leaders to address urgent needs.

One of UNC-SRP’s key projects is integrating hurricane-related data into NC-ENVIROSCAN, a geospatial mapping tool, to create a comprehensive map of impacted counties and provide crucial information on Superfund sites, landfills, predicted private well usage and known private well contaminants. The UNC-SRP is also mobilizing scientists to assist with private well testing to address community concerns beyond microbial contamination, planning chemical exposure assessments in areas of concern raised by residents, and providing environmental health

education resources online to inform and empower communities as they navigate Helene’s aftermath.

“As the UNC-SRP continues its work,” Fry said, “the program remains committed to addressing the pressing environmental and public health needs of communities impacted by Hurricane Helene.”

## LONG-TERM LESSONS

Helene hit N.C. just three days before the Gillings School, in collaboration with the N.C. Institute for Public Health (NCIPH), had planned to launch its Regional Center for Public Health Preparedness. The partners had received a five-year federal grant to establish the Center, one of 10 in the U.S., to study and promote evidence-based strategies that strengthen public health emergency preparedness and response.

The Center is facilitating the School’s role in a major research effort in which, collaborating with the N.C. Division of Public Health and local health departments in counties affected by Helene, researchers from NCIPH, the public health leadership and practice department, and the biostatistics department’s Collaborative Studies Coordinating Center are collecting and analyzing massive amounts of data to develop actionable workplans that will guide future disaster response.

“After any emergency, there are after-action reviews: What went well? What could have been improved?” said **John Wallace, PhD, MSPH**, senior data advisor for NCIPH, who co-directs the Center with Wiesman. “This will give us a better picture of how operations happened and where there were strengths and where there are areas to improve.”

Longer term, the Center’s mission to improve disaster preparedness and response in southeastern states enables the School to continue supporting Western N.C.’s recovery. “Recovery in some people’s minds is the first couple of weeks after a storm. But from the public health perspective and from a systems level, that’s going to take years,” Wiesman said. “Our hope is that we’re going to be able to coordinate that long-term recovery – and Gillings’ role in it, whatever that might be.” 📄



# Content *warning*

Visitors from abroad might be surprised to see the warning labels on a pack of cigarettes for sale in the average American grocery store. Not because the warning labels are prominent or unsightly, but because they aren't.

Despite being the country that first launched the practice of labeling nicotine and tobacco products, which are some of the most addictive and deadly substances available today, the United States now lags behind its peers in communicating the danger.

And these products are deadly, as warning labels on cigarettes and cigars in more than 130 countries indicate. Some labels in Canada have displayed photos of a diseased heart or a blackened lung. In Brazil, a gangrenous foot with missing toes. In the European Union, a sick newborn exposed to cigarettes in utero. In India, a mouth with missing

teeth or tumors. And in Australia, which has some of the toughest laws for tobacco warnings in the world, labels that cover most of a cigarette pack have shown pictures of esophageal cancer, damaged and missing teeth, and the anatomy of an eye blinded by macular degeneration.

Research by Gillings School faculty has demonstrated that warning labels are practical, efficient and powerful tools that public health officials use to help consumers make smarter choices about the products they consume.

Labels are effective because they are more than a means of communication. They are also an intervention – an action taken to improve a situation. They have the potential to work precisely when a person makes a choice that can impact their health.

"The warning is right there on the package. So people see it every time they decide to buy and use the product," said [Marissa Hall, PhD](#), assistant professor of health behavior at the Gillings School. "It's fundamentally different from social media or health

Above: Graphic warning labels from around the world show how other countries communicate the deadly risks of tobacco – often right at the point of purchase.

campaigns. Those are in the ether, but they don't deliver the cue to action right as a person acts."

The U.S. led the evolution of warning labels on tobacco products dating back to the 1960s, helping to refine side-of-pack labels and create more impactful messages that, by the 1980s, warned of heart disease, emphysema, pregnancy complications and carbon monoxide and encouraged quitting to improve health. They also labeled smokeless tobacco products with warnings about addiction, mouth cancer and gum disease.

Since that time, progress to improve the effectiveness of tobacco labels has stalled in the U.S., due in large part to mounting lawsuits from cigarette manufacturers. Even so, public health's efforts to research and design more impactful warning labels have grown.

Researchers at the Gillings School and the UNC Lineberger Comprehensive Cancer Center have studied the effects of pictorial warning labels on cigarettes for decades. Their published research has been a boon to policy experts at the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) as they continue to develop recommendations that improve health for Americans. Those researchers include Hall, [Kurt Ribisl, PhD](#), chair and Jo Anne Earp Distinguished Professor of health behavior, [Noel Brewer, PhD](#), Gillings Distinguished Professor in Public Health, and [Seth Noar, PhD](#), James Howard and Hallie McLean Parker Distinguished Professor at the UNC Hussman School of Journalism and Media.

Their studies, which included the first meta-analysis (a study of all published experimental studies) on graphic warning labels and a randomized controlled

trial on graphic warning labels, helped build high-quality evidence the FDA needed to design effective warning label regulations that could reduce rates of smoking and withstand continuous litigation from the tobacco industry.

“We have a whole chain of evidence, from exposure to behavior, showing that these warning labels do work,” said Noar.

Outside of the U.S., countries across the globe have been so successful at implementing graphic warning labels that the warnings have now become a standard recommendation for the World Health Organization and are a critical part of their MPOWER measures for tobacco control.

In 2009, the U.S. Congress passed a law giving the FDA authority to regulate tobacco products, and the FDA finalized regulations in 2020 to put graphic warning labels on cigarettes. That same year, a study found that nearly 70% of Americans support these pictorial warning labels.

So why are these pictorial warning labels, which are broadly supported by Americans to help them make better health choices, still not on cigarette packs? In large part because of pushback in the form of lawsuits,

political pressure and public comment from tobacco industries that claim a Constitutional right not to put the labels on their products.

Hall sees this sort of industry pushback play out in label regulations for other products, as well, including sugary drinks, junk food and alcohol.

Her work with [Lindsey Smith Taillie, PhD](#), associate professor of nutrition at the Gillings School, used their own UNC Mini Mart to find that pictorial warning labels, such as ones that show a damaged heart or a foot affected by gangrene from Type 2 diabetes, on sugary drinks made North Carolina parents 17% less likely to purchase them for their children.

Smith Taillie and [Barry Popkin, PhD](#), W. R. Kenan Jr. Distinguished Professor of nutrition, have also been collaborating to evaluate the effectiveness of front-of-package warning labels on sugar-sweetened beverages and ultraprocessed foods in Chile, both of which have led to decreases in the purchase of unhealthy products.

Experts find these data are valuable in the design of public health regulations and warning labels that inform the public about the health risks of consuming these products. But industries, which see the decrease in purchases as a threat to their

bottom line, often fight back through the courts and through public commenting to regulatory agencies.

Experts sometimes refer to this process as the “scream test” – the louder an industry “screams,” or fights against a regulation, the more likely the regulation is to be effective at improving public health.

“Every time FDA has public comments on these warning labels, they’re flooded with comments, 10-to-1 industry to public health researchers,” Hall said. “Industry representatives write public comments that are really negative, and then agencies see it as an overwhelming negative response.”

Despite the push back, Hall and colleagues are continuing their warning label research and seeing incremental progress in the U.S. and abroad. In late 2024, the U.S. Supreme Court refused to strike down the FDA’s new pictorial warning label guidelines, although the implementation date was temporarily postponed by a ruling in early 2025 from the U.S. District Court for the Eastern District of Texas. In early 2025, the FDA also entered a public comment period for a proposed new front-of-package nutrition label.

Hall and collaborators are now setting their sights on alcohol, which carries many health harms, including an increased risk of cancer. In early 2025, former U.S.

Surgeon General Vivek Murthy (and Gillings School commencement speaker in 2024) called for warning labels on alcohol to be updated to inform the public about these risks. Hall says that very few countries warn about this link. The U.S. warning label on alcohol, which hasn’t been updated since 1988, only warns about the harms of drinking alcohol during pregnancy or impairing the ability to drive or operate machinery.

“The increased recognition of the risks of alcohol, including cancer risks, could lead to a new phase in alcohol warning label policy,” she said.

Labels are a part of a larger public health strategy to reduce the purchase and consumption of products that are harmful to health, but Hall says they’re not a panacea. The behavior change effects can be small, but when they are extrapolated across a population, they can be very meaningful. They work in tandem with policies that regulate the placement and advertising of these products in stores and in the media, as well as taxes on their purchase.

Even if a warning label doesn’t prevent you from making a purchase, it might make you think twice before you consume it. So next time you’re at the store, take a moment to check the product label. It’s an opportunity to empower your public health knowledge and make a choice that’s better for your health. [📄](#)



*“We have a whole chain of evidence, from exposure to behavior, showing that these warning labels do work.”*

Seth Noar, PhD

# UNDERSTANDING *wildfire smoke*

**Chloe Chou** is a second-year doctoral student in the Gillings School who first became interested in the health impacts of wildfire smoke during California's 2018 Camp Fire. The wildfire burned more than 150,000 acres, destroyed the city of Paradise, Calif., and is the deadliest wildfire in the state's history, with 85 fatalities.

At the time of the fire, Chou was a high school junior living in Cupertino, Calif. Despite being more than 200 miles from the epicenter of the fire, smoke was heavy in her community. Chou's school remained open, and she and many other students walked home from school in the smoke and found themselves coughing badly afterwards.

Fires like the Camp Fire and the recent fires in Los Angeles are called wildland-urban interface wildfires, because they burn across forest

areas and urban development. These fires are different from those that happen on undeveloped land, because the burning of homes and other structures adds many additional chemicals and heavy metals into the smoke's composition.

As wildfires become more common in the United States, it's important to understand the health implications for those who inhale wildfire smoke.

This is particularly true of wildland-urban interface wildfires, since 39% of all American homes are located in the wildland-urban interface.

"All of these additional materials going into a wildfire changes the toxicity of smoke," said **Chloe Chou**, who now works in the lab of Associate Professor **Julia Rager, PhD**. "But up until now we have only been able to make predictions about its chemistry and many of its health impacts using studies focused on wildfires that only burn trees. Wildland-urban interface fires haven't been modeled and measured in a lab setting yet."

Chou and the team in Rager's lab are trying to change that. They have compiled a list of 60 materials that are found in the average American home, including construction materials, appliances, clothing, household chemicals and general clutter such as knick-knacks. These items are currently being ground down to a fine particle that will then be burned in a furnace where the smoke can be analyzed.

"We are trying to learn what materials are the most toxic and the most combustible, and from there hopefully we can help inform choices about what materials are best for homes and buildings in wildfire prone areas," said Rager, who is an associate professor in the Department of Environmental Sciences and Engineering.

Rager's lab is working in partnership with the Environmental Protection Agency, which will perform the tests to analyze the smoke's composition and toxicity levels.

"The more information we can gather about these fires, the more we'll know about how to treat them," said Chou. "My hope is that our research can help guide policy around wildfire response."

While much is still unknown about wildfire smoke, particularly from fires at the wildland-urban interface, it's clear that inhalation of wildfire smoke has a negative health impact.

**Radhika Dhingra**, adjunct assistant professor in the Department of Environmental Sciences and Engineering and current student in the East Carolina University Brody School of Medicine, has also studied air pollution extensively, with a focus on its health effects.

"Most of the research on wildfire smoke so far has looked at short-term health implications and acute events like hospitalizations for asthma in the immediate aftermath of a fire. But we still have a lot to learn about the long-term health effects of inhaling wildfire smoke," said Dhingra.

When it comes to air pollution from wildfire smoke, Dhingra's research has primarily focused on how exposures during gestational and early-life development affect later-life respiratory health. While her research didn't indicate a strong signal that exposure during the gestational period affected health long-term, it did find a link between exposure to wildfire smoke in the first six months of life and the chronic need for lower respiratory medications, such as inhalers or nebulizers, as well as an earlier need for such medications.

"Wildfire smoke is a form of air pollution, and like with air pollution, we know that everybody who inhales it will be impacted," said Dhingra. "Certain groups – like the very young, the elderly, pregnant women and those with cardiovascular disease – are at the greatest risk, but we still have a lot to learn about the long-term health impacts of wildfire smoke exposure."

There are many challenges to quantifying the impact of wildfire smoke. Beyond toxicity variations depending on what's burning, wildfire smoke is heavily impacted by geography and meteorology, and health impacts also vary based on individual factors like stress levels and if those inhaling smoke have any underlying health conditions. As wildfires become more common, Gillings School researchers will continue working to protect the public from this growing threat. 



# How do I talk about MENTAL HEALTH?



**Charletta Sims Evans, MEd**  
ASSOCIATE DEAN FOR STUDENT AFFAIRS / CHAIR OF STUDENT MENTAL HEALTH AND WELL-BEING TASK FORCE

Improving the health of people and their communities is the very foundation of public health, and mental health is a key part of this equation. Mental health influences how people relate to others, deal with stress and manage their responsibilities, and it can have profound impacts on physical and social outcomes both for individuals and communities – in other words, mental health is public health.

## THE 8 DIMENSIONS OF WELL-BEING

A holistic approach to mental well-being means addressing:

1. **Emotional:** Coping with stress and emotions
2. **Physical:** Sleep, movement, nutrition
3. **Social:** Finding connections and support
4. **Spiritual:** Meaning, purpose, values
5. **Intellectual:** Learning and curiosity
6. **Occupational:** Career, academics, balance
7. **Financial:** Managing money and security
8. **Environmental:** Safe, comfortable spaces



*“One thing affects another. If you’re not financially well, if you’re not spiritually well, if you’re not physically well, that affects your mental well-being.”*

Courtesy of [samhsa.gov](https://www.samhsa.gov)

### WELL-BEING IS MORE THAN JUST MENTAL HEALTH.

Mental health is deeply connected to other areas of life – if you’re stressed about finances, feeling isolated or exhausted from school, that impacts your well-being.

*“We need to talk about mental health just like we talk about physical health. If you fall down and scrape your knee, you get help. If you’re struggling mentally, you should do the same.”*

### TRY THIS →

When you’re feeling off, ask yourself:

- Am I getting enough sleep?
- Am I socially connected?
- Am I financially stressed?
- Am I taking care of my body?

### SMALL CHANGES, BIG IMPACT

Simple habits can improve your well-being every day:

- Add a plant to your space
- Listen to calming music
- Take a short walk to reset
- Set screen boundaries, especially social media
- Practice mindfulness/journaling/deep breathing

### TRY THIS →

Commit to one small action this week!

*“Some things seem small but make a big difference – more plants around campus, calming visuals on screens. These little things help people feel better.”*

### WHERE TO TURN FOR SUPPORT

*“We want to be proactive, not reactive, about our well-being. Resources are here – use them.”*

- **Feeling isolated?** → *“A big move or life change can feel overwhelming. Connecting with others – through a group, event or shared experience – can help.”*
- **Overwhelmed?** → *“People don’t always know what they need, which is why talking to a counselor, mentor or support group can make a difference.”*
- **Money worries?** → *“Financial stress affects mental well-being, relationships and work. Seeking financial wellness support is a way to take care of yourself holistically.”*
- **Burned out?** → *“Small environmental changes – like adding plants or shifting surroundings – can ease stress. Finding a grounding space, indoors or outside, can help.”*

### FINAL TAKEAWAY

*“If people aren’t doing well mentally, they won’t do well personally, professionally or academically. We need to support the whole person.”*

Explore more tools and resources at our new **Community Well-Being Website**.

[sph.unc.edu/students/student-wellbeing](https://sph.unc.edu/students/student-wellbeing)





# Jetelina speaks at Gillings 2025 Commencement

Your Local Epidemiologist – or YLE for short – is a free newsletter that delivers “translated” evidence-based public health science twice a week to 310,000 inboxes. From vaccine best practices to nutrition, from the dangers of wildfires smoke to federal health policy, **Dr. Katelyn Jetelina** and her team cover complex public health issues, disprove rumors and translate ever-evolving science into straightforward insights that help readers make informed choices about their health in a timely manner.

On May 10, at the 2025 Commencement celebration of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill’s Gillings School of Global Public Health, Jetelina shared insights drawn from nearly five years of creating public health communications that have reached more than 500 million readers in 132 countries.

“YLE was born in March 2020 when I was teaching at the University of Texas Health Science Center,” she says. “People were desperate for information about this novel coronavirus, and my dean asked me

to send a daily update to our school. It was usually just a couple sentences and a few ugly Excel graphs, but students started asking me to post online instead of in an internal email so they could share the message more easily on social media.”

“I never got one hour of formal education on science communication, but I loved working with students and translating public health information for them,” she adds. “I think that passion is why I was asked to start the newsletter, and why it’s become the trusted resource it is today.”

*“YLE is just one small node in a massive grassroots information system. Our goal is to equip as many trusted messengers as possible with factual, timely and understandable health information.”*

**Dr. Katelyn Jetelina**

Jetelina holds a master’s degree in public health and a doctoral degree in epidemiology and biostatistics. She currently works as an epidemiologist, data scientist and consultant to organizations like the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and Resolve to Save Lives in addition to managing YLE with a team of fifteen other experts and administrators.

She initially thought the public-facing newsletter would primarily reach “Joe on the corner,” or maybe moms considering which vaccinations to give their young children. And it does, but it turns out the audience is mostly made up of doctoral and medical degree holders whose employment runs the gamut.

“What I’ve learned,” she says, “is that our readers tend to be leaders within their local communities: doctors, businesspeople, professors, members of public health departments and so on. They take our content and translate and curate it themselves to share in turn with their patients, colleagues and students. In that way, the information eventually does reach Joe on the corner. YLE is just one small node in a massive grassroots information system. Our goal is to equip as many trusted messengers as possible with factual, timely and understandable health information.”

On that note, Jetelina is no stranger to the perils of being vocal online in a world rife with mis- and disinformation. She used to host YLE on Facebook, but her page was hacked in 2021. All her content and her audience of more than 400,000 people was out of reach. After that experience, she switched hosting sites and dove right back into the fray. Over the years, she has been subject to everything from death threats to doxing to a “thousand papercuts from colleagues.”

“Succeeding in this forum comes down to courage,” says the mother of two. “You have to be willing to put your neck out there and think innovatively in

the name of spreading helpful, evidence-based content. You have to deeply believe in the values of public health and live up to them, which requires listening and community engagement – even when, or especially when, someone disagrees. Public health is, above all, a team sport. I’ve had incredible success, but I can’t do any of this alone.”

YLE recently surpassed 300,000 subscribers – a number that floors Jetelina. She once planned to be a clinician, then pivoted to public health when she realized the field treats patients millions at a time instead of individually. After earning her doctoral degree, she worked for the World Health Organization in Geneva, then the townships in South Africa, before landing a tenure-track faculty position and starting a research lab at UT.

“My career has been a squiggly line,” she laughs. “I was going for tenure when COVID hit. Next thing I knew, I had started YLE and **Dr. Rochelle Walensky** of the CDC was calling my personal cell phone and asking me to support her organization in science translation.”

“It was an incredibly hard decision to leave teaching and research behind, but my goal has always been to make the largest possible positive impact,” Jetelina says. “In academia, practice isn’t always appreciated, but I can see the numbers. When one of my peer-reviewed articles gets seven views and one issue of my newsletter gets a million views, the value of Your Local Epidemiologist is crystal clear.”

“I think Katelyn’s voice and her mission to equip trusted messengers with accurate health information will absolutely resonate with our graduating students,” shares Gillings School Dean **Dr. Nancy Messonnier**. “I’m so excited to welcome her to campus.” 📍

# Where DO I DO PUBLIC HEALTH?

A peek inside the world of **Kim Ramsey-White, PhD**, associate dean for well-being and adjunct associate professor of public health leadership and practice. Ramsey-White came to Carolina in 2022 and has been a critical part of the School's leadership, helping to build initiatives that foster inclusion, dialogue and community well-being.

These 1968 Poor People's March narratives and pictures came from the "Health is a Human Right: Race and Place in America" 20th anniversary exhibit, which I helped bring to Georgia State University along with other colleagues.

I love this caricature, because teaching (in anything, but especially public health) is what feeds my soul. It undergirds Mandela's quote about making a difference in the lives of others.

This jam is a gift from **Vic Shoenbach, PhD**, emeritus professor of epidemiology at the Gillings School and long-time supporter of the Minority Health Conference.

A photo and quote from Nelson Mandela: "What counts in life is not the mere fact that we have lived; it is what difference we have made in the lives of others that will determine the significance of the life we lead." This is 100% my motivation for life.

Family pictures are everywhere because they are so important. This is a picture of me and my late husband, who died from heart disease. It's a major public health issue and part of my research interest in African-American men's health.

Three of my grandchildren and I painted rocks when they were 4, 5 and 6 on a spur-of-the-moment picnic by a creek in upstate New York. They are now 20, 21 and 22. These rocks have moved with me everywhere for the past 14 years.

# Fostering health in the early years

It's undeniable that the first years of life are critically important when it comes to a child's long-term well-being. Experiencing disadvantage, trauma or neglect in the first eight years of life has an outsized impact on a person, while growing up in healthy and stimulating environments lays the foundation for a more stable and healthy life.

Researchers at the Gillings School are studying the unique needs of early childhood from many angles with one goal: giving children the best possible start in life.

"The brain develops so rapidly during these early childhood years. It's really important for children to be in nurturing and stimulating environments in order to create healthy neurological pathways," said **Meghan Shanahan, PhD**, associate professor in the Department of Maternal and Child Health.

Shanahan studies the prevention of child maltreatment – or abuse and neglect – and evaluates how preventing these adverse childhood events optimizes health and well-being. She studies interventions at both the policy and family levels.

"I firmly believe that most parents love their children and don't want to hurt them. And children love their parents, too, and want to be raised by them," said Shanahan. "Adverse childhood events increase the risk of many chronic diseases, so if we can equip parents to parent well and help get more children off to a great start, we're going to improve our physical and mental health at a population level."

Early in her career, Shanahan collaborated with **Desmond Runyan, MD, MPH**, a former professor of social medicine and pediatrics at the UNC School of Medicine and professor emeritus of pediatrics at University of Colorado Anschutz Medical Campus, on a campaign aimed at educating new parents about the period of purple crying. The period of purple crying

refers to the early weeks of an infant's life when there may be an increase in crying for no apparent reason, and the campaign warned parents about the related dangers of shaking a baby. The work was well-funded and included bedside teaching at every birthing hospital in North Carolina, but it failed to reduce abusive head trauma.

For Shanahan, this points to the fact that education and one-on-one programmatic approaches alone can't reduce child maltreatment. Family stress is often thought to be a precipitating factor for abuse and neglect. To counteract this, Shanahan believes that it is important to create a context that is supportive of parenting through policies. About 75% of the cases investigated by Child Protective Services are not for abuse but for neglect, which includes failure to provide proper supervision, clothing or food to a child. These are often scenarios in which investing in a vulnerable family so that they have the support they need – like access to health care, food and high-quality child care – can prevent neglect.

Shanahan's study on the period of purple crying, funded by the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) and Prevention, coincided with results out of Vancouver on the period of purple crying that did show a reduction in abusive head trauma. Thus the CDC's technical package on how to prevent child maltreatment includes information regarding how to create a supportive environment for children and families, of which policies are a critical part.

**Iheoma U. Iruka, PhD**, professor in the Department of Maternal and Child Health, studies early childhood development with a focus on issues related to parent-child and teacher-child interactions.

Iruka grew up in poverty in Boston, Massachusetts. She attended a public exam school for grades seven through 12, and early in life it became her goal to earn a doctoral degree. However, she noticed that many of her peers, especially Black males, who came from similar backgrounds had left the school by the ninth grade. She wanted to understand what factors were at work and why many of her peers struggled in school. Once in graduate school, she started to focus on early childhood development and the interconnected systems that make up a young child's world.

"We know that young children need high-quality early care and educational programming, but there are a lot of stressors outside of school environments that can't be fully overcome by educational programming. So we can't think of this in silos where we separate education out from the other factors that shape a child's development, health and learning," said Iruka.

A child's environments are all highly interconnected, because things like access to high-quality early education also provide stable child care that enables parents to hold down jobs and provides economic and health benefits to families. Similarly, access to health care allows for earlier diagnoses and access to services if a child has autism or needs additional services like speech, physical or occupational therapy. Early access to services has a huge impact on outcomes, and the cost to families and society becomes much higher with late diagnosis and treatment.

"My research prioritizes the needs of children who are facing barriers like racism, discrimination, disability and intergenerational poverty. And it's impossible to fully support children without supporting the

primary adults and caregivers in their lives," said Iruka. "But the policies that really move the needle for the most vulnerable children – things like family medical leave that supports early parent-child bonding, access to quality health insurance, access to early intervention services, income support and access to high-quality early education – help so many people and our society as a whole."

Iruka, Shanahan and many other researchers in the Gillings School are focused on protecting children and setting them up to thrive. There are many factors that affect a child's well-being from the prenatal stage all the way through early childhood. The Gillings School's research seeks to identify the best solutions at each stage to prevent maltreatment, support caregivers and families, provide quality early care and education, and more, so that all children can have the best possible start in life. [📄](#)



# Helping the built environment to improve health

When public health researchers talk about the built environment, they are referring to all human-made structures that create the environment we live in. Homes, schools, workplaces, grocery stores, restaurants, hospitals and more come together to create the environment in which we live out our days, and they have an enormous impact on human health.



Researchers at the Gillings School approach this work from many different angles.

One example is the Gillings School's collaboration with Duke University, North Carolina State University, N.C. A&T University and UNC-Charlotte to lead the Precision Microbiome Engineering, or PreMiEr, research center. PreMiEr studies the microbiome – or community of organisms that live within a given environment – of the entire built environment. It originated during the COVID-19 pandemic and was created to gain a better understanding of how different types of buildings and building operations affected the spread of microbes, and thus diseases.

Professors **Joe Brown, PhD, PE**, and **Barbara Turpin, PhD**, both in the Department of Environmental Sciences and Engineering, represent the Gillings School at PreMiEr. Brown's research evaluates how to prevent the spread of microbes in indoor spaces, particularly in homes, hospitals, workspaces and other large spaces where people congregate and where infection has a high chance of spreading.

"PreMiEr is studying both conventional and new methods of microbial control in built environments, and this work requires that we understand the roles that HVAC, plumbing and other aspects of construction play in a building's ecosystem," said Brown. "We're looking at things like how to improve



ventilation to reduce airborne pathogens or how to prevent the spread of harmful bacteria on surfaces in hospitals. We believe that this work will be increasingly important in the future, because killing these microbes is going to become even more difficult with worsening antibiotic and antimicrobial resistance."

The built environment also has an enormous impact on a person's daily physical activity levels. Those who live in high-traffic areas with poor street connectivity and without a good sidewalk system are far less likely to bicycle or walk to work or other locations they frequent. And if a person's home is not near a high-quality park, they are far less likely to regularly take their children to play at the park.

**Natalicio Serrano, PhD**, assistant professor in the Department of Health Behavior, studies how environmental and policy strategies related to the built environment can increase physical activity and improve health. In many communities in N.C. and throughout the U.S., driving is the only safe and reliable transportation option, which promotes sedentary behavior and raises the risk of many chronic diseases.

"I'm looking at how we can address this by improving land use design and zoning policies, such as bringing in more mixed-use development, facilitating better street connectivity and improving sidewalk access," said Serrano. "But I'm also studying how we can improve the built environment in a way that doesn't harm the people who are already living in an area. Making neighborhoods safer and more accessible also makes them more desirable and increases housing costs, so it's important that as we change land use policies, we do so in a way that provides affordable housing provisions to protect the people who are living in that community."

**Kelly Evenson, PhD**, professor in the Department of Epidemiology, also studies the impact of the built environment on physical activity, with a special focus on walking and bicycling.

She encourages local leaders to try short-term modifications in their communities and learn what works best. For instance, during the pandemic there was a greater need for outdoor restaurant seating in downtown locations, so parking lanes were roped off to extend outdoor seating. Similar modifications can be tested out on roads, temporarily adding walking and cycling lanes, and the use of those modified lanes can be measured to assess if the changes actually increase walking and bicycling in a community.

"It can feel overwhelming to think about how we improve our built environments to foster better health, especially when dealing with things like existing road networks. But there are short-term changes we can try and then measure to assess if they improve outcomes or not," said Evenson. "Small changes to the built environment can make a big difference, and it's worth it to create healthier environments in the future. We don't have to be stuck with the same unhealthy environments repeating over and over."

Other examples of Gillings School research in this area include the work of **Leah Frerichs, PhD**, associate professor, and **Arrianna Marie Planey, PhD**, assistant professor, both in the Department of Health Policy and Management. Frerichs studies how physical environments influence youth health behaviors in underserved communities, while Planey studies how the built environment affects access to and utilization of health care. The list of how the built environment affects public health goes on and on, so it will remain an important area of focus as Gillings School researchers seek to make daily life healthier and better for all people. 🏡



# Staff in focus

Meet some of our dedicated staff who help ensure the success of the Gillings School and its students!



## Brad Mallard Director of Foundation Relations and Industry Engagement

**What most interests you about your job?** I enjoy collaborating with faculty and staff to identify philanthropic support from private foundations and corporations. Through these philanthropic efforts, I am able to help strengthen our teaching, research and practice work and advance the school's mission of improving public health in North Carolina and beyond. Our faculty and staff are doing some incredible things, and I am thankful for the opportunity to learn from them and partner with them!

**How do you unwind?** I unwind by spending time with my wife and daughter, often by taking in my daughter's high school color guard and winter guard programs. Our family is also very involved at our church, as our faith is important to us. For personal hobbies, I enjoy exercising, reading and cheering for the Tar Heels and Carolina Panthers.

**What do you think is the biggest issue in public health today?** One of the biggest public health issues today is misinformation. Many people have perceptions about public health but genuinely don't understand what it is and how it influences people's lives for the better. We have a great opportunity at the Gillings School to share positive stories of impact about how public health is improving our state, nation and world, and I am glad to help share these stories as I work with our philanthropic partners.



## Naya Villarreal Global Health Director

**What most interests you about your job?** The people! I get to work with a variety of people from students, faculty, staff, alumni and global partners to help promote, create and manage global health programming at the school. Knowing I have a hand in helping our school's global efforts by working alongside the best people (I'm biased) is something I do not ever take for granted.

**How do you unwind?** I don't! I'm a doctoral student in my spare time, but I try to unwind by treasuring the time I spend with my family (like at dinner time, taking neighborhood walks with our dog and getting hugs from my daughter).

**What do you think is the biggest issue in public health today?** At this moment in time? Misinformation. Misinformation is being spread and used to dismantle global public health. It is also being used to sow doubt into public health research and practice (e.g., vaccines).



## Anne Glauber Director of Innovation

**What most interests you about your job?** I love the opportunity to establish relationships with the great people at the Gillings School and across Carolina, learn about what they are doing and what they want to achieve, and then jump into the challenge with them to help them achieve their dreams.

**How do you unwind?** I am re-energized by being outside and try to prioritize that every day. I'm fortunate enough to have several ways to do that naturally built into my day, with a dog that keeps me honest about multiple daily walks and a commute by bike to campus! I am also a beekeeper, and, believe it or not, spending time with an open hive 'working the bees' is incredibly relaxing.

**What do you think is the biggest issue in public health today?** I think climate change is the biggest threat to our environment and to public health. Rising temperatures, habitat destruction and air pollution all have detrimental effects on public health. I also think the lack of effective communication between people with differing opinions is a real threat to the fabric of our society.



## Cornelius Williams Assistant Director of Admissions

**What most interests you about your job?** I really enjoy speaking with prospective students and learning their "why." No two stories are the same, and it keeps me on my toes.

**How do you unwind?** I enjoy working out, riding my motorcycle and spending time with my family.

**What do you think is the biggest issue in public health today?** I think the biggest issue in public health currently is access to fair and affordable health care.



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Check out *Carolina Public Health* magazine online. Read this and previous issues, as well as our Impact Report, which comes out every fall.



Regardless of the language you speak or where you live, we all experience health challenges – ones that we share, knowingly or unknowingly, with people around the world.

# Connecting continents: Gillings in Latin America

Addressing public health concerns, like chronic conditions and infectious disease, requires understanding an array of settings, cultures and strategies to improve outcomes globally and apply these insights locally. This collaborative process leads to better health for all.

Latin American countries are some of our closest neighbors – places where Gillings School researchers are putting the local-global mindset to work.

## DOMINICAN REPUBLIC Improving care for chronic conditions

Researchers in health behavior, like Professor [Clare Barrington, PhD](#), and Assistant Professor [Deshira Wallace, PhD](#), are studying how psychological and social stressors affect prevention and management of chronic conditions in the Dominican Republic. Their goal is to improve health care and support systems to provide holistic care and reduce barriers to treatment for vulnerable communities.

Barrington focuses on HIV treatment, a condition at the intersection of infectious and chronic disease management. Advances in medicine allow people with HIV to live longer, but stigma can hinder their navigation of the health care system, especially if they

have another chronic condition, like diabetes. HIV care physicians can manage social determinants that lead to better HIV outcomes but often can't treat other conditions.

"The success of HIV care delivery has generated this need to re-think how health care is structured for vulnerable populations," she said.

## BOLIVIA, BRAZIL, CHILE, MEXICO, U.S. The epigenetics of kidney and liver diseases and obesity

People of Hispanic/Latino origin are often underrepresented in genetic studies that inform treatment strategies, especially for conditions like obesity, chronic kidney disease and chronic liver disease.

Researchers in epidemiology like Professors [Nora Franceschini, MD](#), and [Kari North, PhD](#), investigate how multi-omics – variations in biological processes,

genetics, metabolism, environment and more – affect disease susceptibility, detection and management for Hispanic/Latino communities. They have studied populations in many Central and South American countries and Americans of Hispanic/Latino ancestry.

## CENTRAL AMERICA The epidemiology of chronic kidney disease in rural communities

Chronic kidney disease of unknown cause is highly prevalent in several Central American countries and the U.S. Researchers in epidemiology like Franceschini and Professor [Larry Engel, PhD](#), study job exposures, medications and other risk factors for chronic kidney disease in rural communities to better understand disease causes and identify preventable factors. This work is a collaboration with several Central American sites known to be hotspots of chronic kidney disease.

## BOLIVIA Water security and sanitation solutions

Bolivia has recently faced severe droughts and water shortages. Research from Professor [Joe Brown, PhD](#), contributes to environmental sciences and engineering solutions that deliver water and sanitation to the greatest amount of people under challenging conditions.

Brown also explores Far-UVC, a safe, affordable ultraviolet radiation technology used to sanitize indoor spaces and prevent spread of infection. Far-UVC lamps can be used in health care facilities to prevent hospital-acquired infections resistant to antibiotic treatment.

Antimicrobial resistance is increasing globally and will significantly impact human health, making affordable sanitation solutions even more necessary.

"Antimicrobial resistance is what's going to kill all of us eventually," he said. "Suddenly that little scrape you have on your knee is not something that an antibiotic is going to take care of."

## ECUADOR, GALAPAGOS, GUATEMALA, NICARAGUA Improving environmental safety and nutrition for kids

Professor [Sylvia Becker-Dreps, MD, MPH](#), an epidemiologist and family physician, studies infectious diseases impacting children in Guatemala and Nicaragua, focusing on digestive system viruses causing harmful diarrhea. Her current research in Guatemala examines how the mother's immune system may protect their infants against norovirus, informing future vaccine design. Reducing diarrhea impacts a child's nutritional status and development.

"The work we are doing to understand how babies develop immunity to norovirus is already informing pediatric norovirus vaccines in the U.S., too," she said.

In the Galapagos and Ecuador, Professor [Amanda Thompson, PhD](#), researches nutritional and environmental factors shaping a child's long-term health and obesity risk, including food security, access to clean drinking water, improved breastfeeding practices, and mental health and educational support for parents.

## CHILE Food label policies to reduce ultraprocessed food consumption

Nutrition researchers, including Distinguished Professor [Barry Popkin, PhD](#), Distinguished Scholar [Shu Wen Ng, PhD](#), and Associate Professor [Lindsey Smith Taillie, PhD](#), evaluate public health policies in Latin America to moderate the negative impacts of ultraprocessed foods high in sugar, salts and other unhealthy additives. These foods contribute to obesity and chronic disease globally.

Their studies on labels, taxes and marketing laws on ultraprocessed foods in Chile show that these policies support healthier diet choices, reduce exposure to ultraprocessed foods and even lead to product reformulation. These policies provide a framework for change in other Latin American countries and could inspire future change in other nations. [📄](#)

## Nashmia Khan establishes communities wherever she goes

### What's your role in public health?

I'm a second-year Master of Public Health student in the Health Behavior concentration. Now that I'm in my third semester, I feel like I've gotten my bearings and have more flexibility to explore everything both public health and the Triangle area have to offer.

I'm a teaching assistant for two professors: **Drs. Nat Serrano** and **Liz Chen**. They're also my mentors, and I love getting to work with both of them and being exposed to different ideas, from digital health interventions to design thinking to housing equity.

**For more Gillings stories of impact, discovery and surprise in public health:**

- **The Pivot articles:** [sph.unc.edu/comm/the-pivot](https://sph.unc.edu/comm/the-pivot)
- **The Pivot podcast:** Search "pivot gillings" on your favorite podcast app



### Can you describe your focus area in one sentence?

*I'm passionate about working in health advocacy and health equity spaces.*

That links to my focus on tobacco cessation in support of populations that tobacco marketing strategies have intentionally and unethically targeted. At the Gillings School, I've also been able to work on the use of design thinking and trauma-informed principles in mobile health and the intersection of built environment and health outcomes – all emphasizing my interest in health equity. In the long term, I'm seeking a balance between applied research and policy/program evaluation and dissemination.



Health Behavior pizza party at Kurt Ribisl's house with departmental social chairs.

### What brought you to public health?

I was born in Pakistan and moved to the United States as an undergraduate. I graduated college in 2020 – what you're thinking is true; graduating at the start of a pandemic wasn't fun – and I took a job at the Yale School of Medicine. I worked there for three years before coming to the Gillings School.

At Yale, I was a clinical research assistant on three smoking cessation projects. One focused on neuroimaging related to mindfulness and smart apps; another was an adolescent vaping cessation clinical trial; and the third was an FDA-funded research study that used eye tracking to measure the influence of e-cigarette warning labels on the youth population.

The third study is the one that brought me to public health. Up to that point, I'd been planning to

eventually get a doctoral degree in neuroscience. I was already a certified special ed teacher and thought the combination would lead to a career in child neuropsychology. But when the FDA project exposed me to the concept of public health policy, I completely changed tracks. I only applied to schools with strong tobacco research portfolios, and I was drawn to the Gillings School in part because of the work of **Drs. Kurt Ribisl** and **Noel Brewer**.

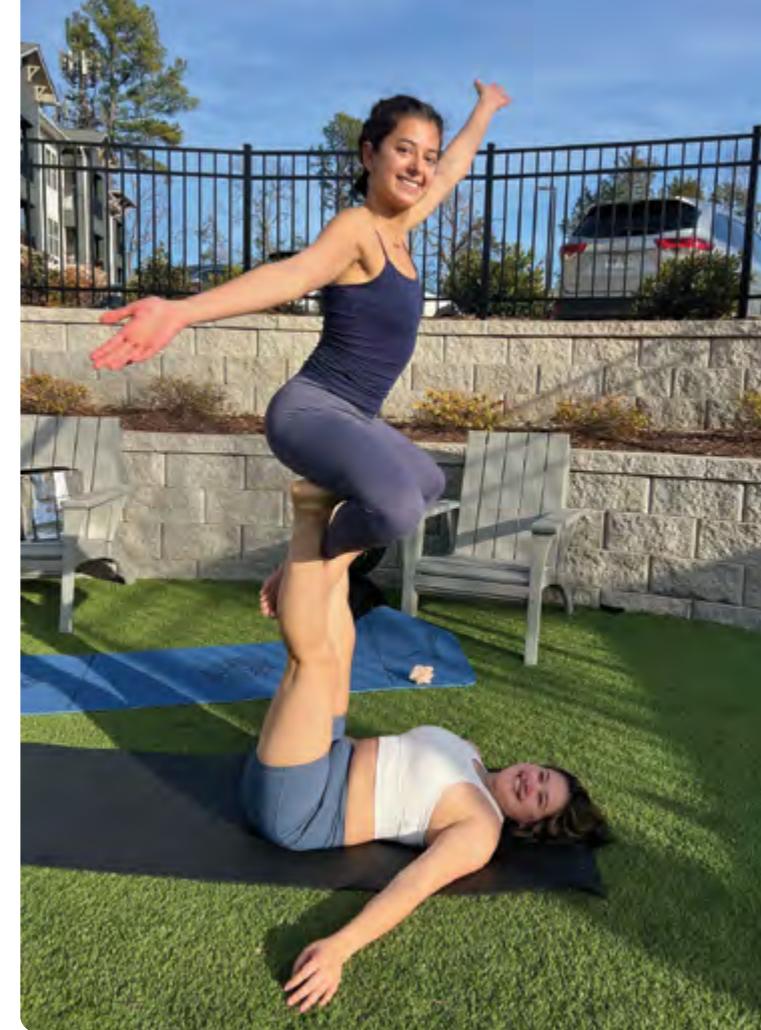
### Can you describe a time when you've pivoted in your public health career?

As an international student, I have to be comfortable with frequent pivots. Students in my position face unique obstacles, from funding barriers to how long we can stay in the country. We are required to be mentally quick and open to change, which might mean switching specialties from something you're passionate about to something more practical.

That happened to me during the pandemic. I was going to work in a lab studying Alzheimer's, but the funding dried up, and I had just 90 days to either find another position or leave the U.S. I applied to more than 300 jobs and was lucky to get the placement at Yale.

Those experiences are why I volunteer as co-president of the recently formed Gillings International Graduate Student Association (IGSA). We strive to advocate for and offer support to international students, raise awareness of the challenges faced by international students, and effectively communicate their needs to school leadership and relevant entities and departments. At the UNC Gillings School of Global Public Health, it's important to be inclusive of students around the globe and highlight their needs and perspectives.

We're partnering with Gillings School leaders right now on a project to make it more clear which degrees at the School have official STEM status, because that designation affects how long international graduates can stay in the U.S. after finishing classes.



Kahn (pictured here in the air during an acro yoga pose) combines her background in neuroscience with public health research, focusing on health equity, adolescent substance use and international student advocacy at the Gillings School.

### Who are you when you're at home?

Friends describe me as someone who is full of life! I'm fond of establishing communities wherever I go, which is why I enjoy being the social chair for the health behavior department. I love bringing people together, and my focus right now is bridging the gap between different concentrations at the Gillings School. One way I approach that is by hosting weekly student socials at local businesses.

On other nights, you might find me salsa dancing, rock climbing or doing acro yoga. 🧘

# Dr. Diego Garza takes a multi-faceted approach to public health

Diego Garza, MD, MPH '17

(public health leadership), brings a wealth of experience to his role on the Public Health Foundation Board of Directors at the UNC Gillings School of Global Public Health.

Now senior vice president of strategy and innovation at Mindpath Health in Durham, North Carolina, his journey into public health and health care began at age 11, when his grandmother experienced serious health issues. He was impressed by the medical professionals they encountered, and this difficult time instilled an early desire to “heal” people, which evolved into a lifelong commitment to improving public health.

During his medical training, Garza observed that many working on the front lines of public health did not have specific training in the field, but he saw the promise in a public health approach.

“My question was, how do I use my clinical skillset to increase access to high-quality services?”

Garza’s broad base of experience is evident in his work. “I think about it from any and every angle,” he says. As a board member, he adopts a strategic perspective, encouraging collaboration among different stakeholders. “The true magic happens when all stakeholders start working together.”

Some of his most significant contributions have been in the area of telehealth. His work to develop telehealth services in Mexico highlighted the importance of tailoring interventions to specific

populations. “There are overall frameworks we can apply for everyone. But for outcomes to be improved, we need to take a deeper dive into what influences the behaviors of your population,” he said. This open-minded and adaptable approach fueled subsequent success in developing telepsychiatry services for people across N.C. and the United States. “I designed a program to treat 400 people per month, originally, and now we treat more than 100,000,” he said.

Garza’s dedication to education and mentorship is another cornerstone of his career. A proud alum of the Gillings School, he remains actively involved, mentoring students and participating in School initiatives. “I want anyone and everyone to feel that the School is for them and that they can thrive in that environment,” he says. Garza’s efforts to support international students and ensure the School considers global applicants have been particularly impactful.

When asked about his advice to current or potential students, Garza emphasizes the importance of leveraging one’s strengths and getting involved in local initiatives. “Our field belongs to all of us, and it affects all of us,” said Garza. “Be aware of your limitations but get everything you can out of your strengths.”



Dr. Garza speaks at an event for admitted students, spring 2025.

*“Trato de analizar todo desde la perspectiva de la salud pública, y trabajo para entender mejor a las poblaciones a las que estamos intentado ayudar para poder crear estrategias que realmente ayuden a resolver los problemas de esa población,” dijo Garza.*

*“Creo que mi experiencia trae consigo una visión en la que la salud pública es responsabilidad de todos y requiere de colaboración entre los diferentes sectores.”*

His journey from a young boy inspired by his grandmother’s health struggles to a leader in public health is a testament to his dedication and innovative approach. Garza’s work continues to bridge the gap between clinical practice and public health, making a significant impact on communities locally and globally.

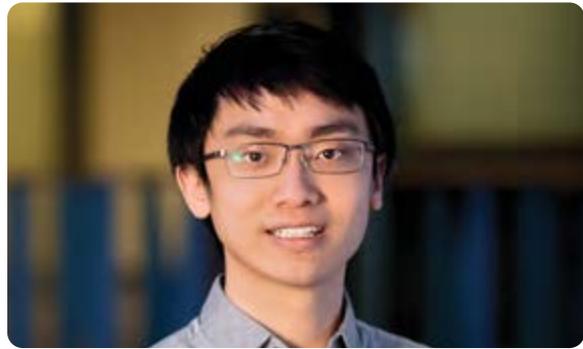
*“La pregunta principal era como hacer uso de mi entrenamiento clínico para incrementar el acceso a servicios de salud.”*

*“Quiero que todo el mundo sepa y sienta que esta escuela es para ellos y que pueden ser exitosos en esta industria.”*

*“La salud publica nos pertenece a todos y nos afecta a todos. Entiende tus limitaciones, pero aprovecha al máximo tus capacidades.”*

“I bring the public health perspective to every aspect of my job, trying to understand my populations better to better tailor effective strategies that address the main issues or challenges,” Garza said. Overall, my experience supports a holistic view of public health as a shared responsibility that requires collaboration across disciplines and sectors.” 

# Gillings faculty: 5 questions



## David Zhang, PhD

Assistant Professor,  
Biostatistics and Genetics

### Where did you grow up?

I grew up in Beijing, China, and I came to the United States when I was 16. I noticed life here is much less competitive.

### When did you know that public health was your path?

I started with a background in pure mathematics and computer science, but I was introduced to genomics and medical imaging in graduate school. I was drawn to biomedical data because of the complex and interesting problems in the field.

### What are your research interests?

My research focuses on developing novel AI frameworks to advance critical biomedical and health care domains, including spatial omics, computational pathology, medical imaging and medical text analysis.

### What do you do to unwind?

Running. I usually run 5k every morning with my goldendoodle in the neighborhood.

### What do you think is the top public health issue today?

The potential and the hype of AI in transforming biomedical research and health care. AI will automate many routines of knowledge workers, but it is unclear to what extent this will happen and how intelligent AI will become.



## Larelle H. Bookhart, PhD, MPH, RD, IBCLC

Assistant Professor, Maternal and Child Health; Member, Carolina Global Breastfeeding Institute

### Where did you grow up?

I'm a proud native of Halifax County. My family has strong roots in Eastern North Carolina which has shaped my career and my affinity to want to promote optimal health here in N.C.

### What are your research interests?

My research interests include nutrition during the first 1,000 days of life, health care system practices and policies that influence early nutrition, and interventions to reduce and eliminate early nutrition-related health inequities with a focus on breast/chest feeding. My research includes examining factors associated with in-hospital exclusive breastfeeding among healthy, term newborns. I aim to create a continuum of support from the clinical setting to community setting in collaboration with community-based maternal care workers to improve breast/chest feeding outcomes. I am currently a co-investigator for the Partnering with WIC to Advance Maternal Health Equity Collaborating Center, which aims to support research and implementation of evidence-based strategies that can recognize and treat urgent maternal health warning signs among WIC participants.

### When did you know that public health was your path?

I entered undergrad interested in pursuing a career in medicine. I took a public policy seminar course my freshman year of undergrad at UNC that explored inequities in various systems in the U.S., including the education system and the health care system. I knew then that to address the inequities that have adversely affected members of my family and community, I needed to pursue a career that focused on systems and population level health.

### What do you do to unwind?

I like to unwind by taking long walks in nature. I enjoy spending time with my family. When I am able to, I like to catch up on documentaries and law and medicine dramas such as the Lincoln Lawyer, the Resident, Your Honor and my all-time-favorite Law and Order Special Victims Unit.

### What do you think is the top public health issue today?

Based on my vantage point, the biggest issues in public health today are the racial and socioeconomic health inequities that stem from structural racism. I look forward to a career that will address this.



## Dilshad Jaff, MD, MPH

Associate Professor, Public Health Leadership and Practice

### Where did you grow up?

I was born in Iraq in a town situated between lowland Mesopotamia and the highlands of Persia. As a Kurd, my community has been ravaged by conflict and violence for millennia. The armies of empires lying to the east and west of my town have passed through it for centuries and even today. Throughout the ages, my community has suffered the direct and indirect impacts of wars, and my distant ancestors and living relatives have often been forced to flee our home.

### What are your research interests?

My research interests are shaped by my personal and work experience: how to address complicated humanitarian crises across the world. There are so many complex issues in these settings – health care

services including mental health, maternal and child health, refugee communities and internal displacement, crisis response, and others. It's important to communicate well and collaborate with other people and organizations so that we can address these critical challenges collectively. Research and scholarship related to improving humanitarian assistance has been an important focus for me during my career. Over the years, I conducted a range of implementation research studies that gathered data to improve humanitarian health practice. Included among my particular expertise and skills are designing, implementing and leading programs in humanitarian crisis and low-income settings; community engagement and interventions in crisis settings; managing emergencies, such as outbreak control, mass casualties and malnutrition; and other related subjects. I have published more than 50 peer-reviewed papers and book chapters on complex humanitarian emergencies, mental health and quality of care in humanitarian settings. My papers have served as guidance tools to other practitioners who are working to improve the quality of care offered by humanitarian organizations. These commendations and actions suggest that my work has a considerable impact on the field of public health in the U.S. and beyond. Considering the continuing world crises and the success of my work to date, I am confident that I will continue to contribute in important ways to improving health service delivery in complex emergencies.

## When did you know that public health was your path?

Conflict really shaped my path. I grew up in a conflict zone and have worked in a number of settings where there are complex humanitarian emergencies. There are so many needs – medical, public health, conflict resolution, psychological and social support. Being a physician is useful, but the relationship is one-to-one between the patient and physician. It's not about the community. More was needed, and I felt that I could do more.

## What do you do to unwind?

I write. I have written a lot of commentaries and viewpoints online, and I've journaled a lot, even on scrap pieces of paper in the field. For me, writing is healing. So is talking to my family members and social network – they are an important source of support. I do meditation a lot as well.

## What do you think is the top public health issue today?

For me, it's mental health. This is an important issue everywhere, but for me, especially, in conflict zones. Every community you go into in a conflict zone, for example, you see all these generations who grew up with violence and conflict, and there is no effective way to help and treat them. On top of that, education is disrupted, health services are disrupted, and poverty and disease are widespread. I mean, it's 2025, and still people die from measles and cholera and all these things, and polio and others sometimes. But I think mental health needs more attention.



## Lamis Jomaa

Assistant Professor, Nutrition

## Where did you grow up?

I grew up in the Middle East, spending my childhood between Lebanon, my homeland, a small and

beautiful country along the eastern coast of the Mediterranean Sea and the United Arab Emirates, where my family sought refuge for a few years to escape the war. Growing up in the Middle East, I was fortunate to enjoy the long and rich history of vibrant traditions, natural beauty, diverse cultural heritage, rich cuisine and warm hospitality.

## When did you know that public health was your path?

My interest in the field of public health started during my high school years when I started reading more about nutrition and how food impacts our health and well-being. Despite my strong interest in this field, I first started my undergraduate studies as an English literature major before shifting into the field of nutrition, which was still a young and growing field of studies in the Middle East. It was through volunteering and extracurricular activities during college and beyond that got me particularly interested in the field of community and public health nutrition. This got me to change my major and pursue my undergraduate degree in nutrition and dietetics and then completed my dietetic internship at the American University of Beirut in Lebanon before pursuing my graduate studies in the U.S. as a Fulbright Scholar. I have always been interested in learning how public health nutrition programs and community-based interventions can make a difference in people's lives, especially children and adolescents.

## What are your research interests?

My research interests are focused on evaluating the burden and determinants of food and nutrition insecurity experienced by different population groups including children, adolescents, young adults (college students), as well as refugees and displaced individuals in the U.S. and globally. In addition, my work includes designing evidence-based community nutrition interventions that aim

at reducing health disparities while improving overall nutrition and health outcomes of those most at risk of food insecurity and malnutrition. In parallel, I continue to work on innovative methods to promote sustainable, healthy and affordable diets and examine environmental footprints associated with dietary changes observed among different population groups.

## What do you do to unwind?

I enjoy spending time with my family, reading non-fiction books, listening to different podcasts and international music, going for outdoor walks and hikes, swimming, and traveling to visit different countries and learn more about the diversity of cultures and rich cuisines. Yes, both my husband and I are foodies.

## What do you think is the top public health issue today?

In my opinion, one of the biggest challenges that continue to face public health is the high rates of food insecurity and malnutrition in its different forms – undernutrition, overnutrition (overweight and obesity) and micronutrient deficiencies – that affect the most vulnerable individuals and communities in the U.S. and globally. My research and personal interests in this domain are the culmination of my lived experiences and a career that is focused on examining how conflicts and wars along with poor governance, inequities in distribution of resources can uproot lives, destroy livelihoods, damage our environment and perpetuate food insecurity, leading to the vicious cycles of poverty and malnutrition. Despite these challenges, I find hope in the field of public health to continue to uplift the unheard voices of those most vulnerable, to protect and promote the health and lives of those most in need, and uphold human rights of ensuring food, clothes, shelter, education (and more) are always provided to all people for a dignified life. 📖

## A JOURNEY OF SERVICE:

# From data enthusiast to public health advocate

**Adam Parker, PhD, MS '93** (biostatistics), sits on the Board of Directors of the UNC Gillings School of Global Public Health's Public Health Foundation, and he holds a Master of Science degree from the School.

His training in biostatistics, and a fascination with the secrets hidden within large troves of data, prepared him for a successful career on Wall Street. He currently serves as Founder of U.S. equity-focused firm Trivariate Research, where he specializes in rooting out inefficiencies in the stock market. His continued involvement in the Gillings School made him increasingly aware of how much public health significantly improves the quality of life and productivity for many.

Parker is quick to point out that the world of statistics was vastly different when he went to college. "Computers were a rarity among students, and the field was steeped in theory," he said. However, he developed core statistical competencies while working alongside researchers who were at the forefront of the field.

As a student, he found that he thrived on problem sets rather than essays, and his data-focused journey led him to the University of North Carolina, drawn by a significant investment from SAS Institute and cutting-edge software for applied statistics.

Reminiscing on his first visit to Chapel Hill, Parker acknowledges that the sunny, 75-degree weather starkly contrasted with the frigid 5-degree weather in Pittsburgh, where he had just gone on another university tour. However, he notes that the brilliance of professors like **Lawrence Kupper, PhD '70**, and **Gary Koch, PhD '68**, along with an impressive student body, left a lasting impression.

"The autonomy and inspiring community at UNC drew me back," he said. "It was the people and the freedom to pursue meaningful work that made all the difference."



After realizing career success, Parker's interest in public health continued to grow, fueled by a desire to engage in meaningful philanthropy. Conversations with influential figures like Michael Bloomberg, who emphasized the importance of extending productive years of life, resonated deeply with him. He saw the potential for data and analytics to revolutionize health care, making it more efficient and effective.

"Public health isn't just about treating diseases; it's about preventing them and improving lives on a large scale," he said. "That's why I'm passionate about supporting this field."

Parker has served on the Public Health Foundation Board at the Gillings School for 10 years, including as immediate past chair, and during that time, he has advocated for the critical role of public health in extending life expectancy and improving productivity. He is particularly excited about opportunities to fuse health care and technology, such as the use of artificial intelligence to reduce errors in breast cancer screening. This innovation has the potential to improve patient outcomes while freeing health care professionals to focus on patients.

"Adam has been a great partner and friend, and I am grateful for his steadfast leadership of the board over the past two years," said **Mary Margaret Carroll**, associate dean for advancement at the Gillings School. "This caps a decade of service that has ensured a strong board and sound management of our charitable funds."

Through his service, Parker aims to inspire others to support the Gillings School, ensuring UNC continues to lead in public health innovation and make a lasting impact on communities worldwide.

"Seeing the potential for data and analytics to revolutionize health care is incredibly exciting," said Parker. "It's not just about better stocks; it's about better outcomes for everyone."

## SCHOOL NEWS

Here are some examples of the many honors, grants and recognitions that School students, faculty, staff and alumni have received in the past year.

### STUDENTS

Three Gillings students won the 2024 Award for Excellence in Health Equity Research. This is the fifth year that Gillings has offered this honor and the first year that students and postdoctoral researchers were eligible to receive it. The awardees are:

- **Doctoral student: Austin Waters, Department of Health Policy and Management (HPM)**, for his research that has significantly advanced the understanding of health care inequities faced by LGBTQ+ cancer survivors and caregivers.
- **Master of Public Health (MPH) student: Fred Tusabe, Climate, Environment and Health concentration**, for his work addressing critical disparities in water, sanitation and hygiene (WaSH) practices, with a focus on low- and middle-income countries.
- **Undergraduate student: Emile Charles, Nutrition concentration**, for a wide range of work ranging from hands-on labor – helping community gardens in rural North Carolina harvest more than 38,000 pounds of fresh produce that was delivered to over 1,400 vulnerable community members – to developing research best practices.

**Halle Evans**, Master of Science student in environmental sciences and engineering (ESE), was awarded the Dwight David Eisenhower Transportation Fellowship Program Graduate Fellowship from the United States Department of Transportation. Through her work on vehicle-to-grid technology in Thailand, Evans is investigating the potential of electric vehicles to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and evaluating the cost-effectiveness of these systems.

**Jaya Dayal**, a senior obtaining her Bachelor of Science in Public Health degree, received the John H. Barnhill Civic Trailblazer Award from N.C. Campus Engagement, a statewide collegiate network committed to preparing students for civic and social responsibility. Dayal co-founded the UNC Democracy & Dialogue Fellows Program to empower students to use dialogue as a tool to have challenging yet necessary conversations.

**Gina Hidalgo**, a graduate student in ESE, won the Campus Sustainability photo contest for her submission, *Managing Dust*, which provides an inside look at the UNC School of Nursing's Carrington Renewal Project. Hidalgo, who studies exposure science, took the photo because it represents the controls implemented to mitigate exposures to those working on the building and the general public.

UNC Gillings' third biannual **Pitch Competition** saw 48 students across 12 teams exploring entrepreneurial solutions to pressing public health challenges. The three winning teams were:

- **First Place: Sensible Pad**, a diagnostic menstrual pad that non-invasively screens for cervical cancer at a low cost. Coached by **Erik Eaker, MHA**, an undergraduate and graduate alumnus of Gillings, the team won \$3,000 + \$5,000 in consulting services from BlueDoor Consulting. **Vinitha Panchikarla**, an HPM undergraduate student, was part of the research team.
- **Second Place and People's Choice Award: Olea Health** transforms health care accessibility for underserved populations by providing AI-driven, SMS-based health education and preventative care solutions. The team, which includes HPM undergraduate student **Aveena Khanderia**, was coached by **Sammy Orelie, DrPH**, an executive doctoral alumnus of Gillings. They won \$1,500 for second place and \$200 for People's Choice.
- **Third Place: MedFam** provides discounted lodging rates to families in emergency medical situations through hospital and hotel partnerships. The team, which includes MPH in epidemiology student **Varad Gurude**, won \$750 and was coached by **Richard Kelly**, an undergraduate Gillings alumnus.

The **Impact in Practice Award** is a \$500 non-service award that recognizes students who made a significant, immediate and direct impact on public health practice during their summer 2024 practicum experience, with a focus on capacity building, community engagement and health equity. This year's winners, all MPH students, are:

- **Olivia Hoynes** – Project: Preparing Volunteer Birth Doula in a Hospital-Based Program: Designing, Implementing and Evaluating a New Approach to Doula Training. Organization: Birth Partners Volunteer Doula Program
- **Paddy Qiu** – Project: Assessing and Mitigating Cervical Cancer Risks: The Impact of Social Determinants and Educational Interventions on HIV-Infected Women in Bali, Indonesia. Organization: Minority Health Research Training Program (MHRT) from the National Institute on Minority Health and Health Disparities (NIMHD)
- **Lauren Lansing** – Project: Evaluating Sexually Transmitted Infection (STI) Screenings Among Pre-Exposure Prophylaxis (PrEP) Clients in Hanoi, Vietnam. Organization: Hanoi Medical University.

**Rotimi Kukoyi**, Bachelor of Science in Public Health student in health policy and management, was the undergraduate recipient of the 2025 Robert E. Bryan Public Service Award for his outstanding public health work and leadership as an undergraduate student through the Student Health Action Coalition (SHAC) and Get Covered Carolina.

Three students were honored with the Gillings School Graduate Teaching Assistant Awards, which recognize teaching assistants who inspire students, enhance learning, support success and facilitate their development as public health professionals. They are:

- **Kevin Yu**, MPH student in nutrition,
- **Summer Peterson**, Doctoral student in health behavior, and
- **Yating Zou**, Doctoral student in biostatistics.

## FACULTY/STAFF

**Sarah Mills, PhD, MPH**, assistant professor of health behavior, received the faculty Award for Excellence in Health Equity Research, which recognizes outstanding research that advances solutions to health inequities. Mills was honored for her groundbreaking studies that highlight racial and socioeconomic disparities in tobacco use and the marketing of menthol cigarettes, which have influenced regulatory actions and shaped the strategies of major tobacco prevention programs.

**David J. Weber, MD, MPH**, a Gillings epidemiology professor and distinguished leader in infection prevention and health care epidemiology, is serving as the president of the 2025 board of trustees for the Society for Healthcare Epidemiology of America (SHEA). SHEA's mission is to promote safe health care practices and reduce the burden of health care-associated infections worldwide.

**Eleven Gillings academics** were named to Clarivate's 2024 list of Highly Cited Researchers™ recognizing global research scientists and social scientists who have demonstrated exceptional influence by publishing multiple papers frequently cited by their peers during the last decade. From the Gillings School, those faculty include:

- **Ralph S. Baric, PhD**, William R. Kenan, Jr. Distinguished Professor of epidemiology.
- **Noel T. Brewer, PhD**, Gillings Distinguished Professor in Public Health and professor of health behavior.
- **Stephen R. Cole, PhD**, professor of epidemiology.
- **Rachel Graham, PhD**, assistant professor of epidemiology.
- **Lisa Gralinski, PhD**, assistant professor of epidemiology.
- **Sarah Leist, PhD**, research associate in epidemiology.
- **Hans W. Paerl, PhD**, professor of marine and environmental sciences and engineering and William R. Kenan, Jr. Distinguished Professor at UNC's Institute of Marine Sciences.
- **Barry M. Popkin, PhD**, William R. Kenan, Jr. Distinguished Professor of nutrition.
- **Byron Powell, PhD, LCSW**, adjunct associate professor of health policy and management at Gillings and associate professor at the Brown School at Washington University in St. Louis.
- **Alexandra Schaefer, PhD**, assistant professor of epidemiology.
- **Timothy Sheahan, PhD**, assistant professor of epidemiology.

**Joseph Ibrahim, PhD**, Alumni Distinguished Professor of biostatistics, received the American Statistical Association's Samuel S. Wilks Memorial Award. Director of graduate studies for the Department of Biostatistics and director of the department's Biostatistics for Research in Genomics and Training Grant, Ibrahim focuses on developing statistical methodology related to clinical trials, cancer and genomics research. He was selected for this prestigious award for his distinguished career in biostatistics, as well as his contributions to cancer research, genomics and statistical education, which have significantly advanced public health and medical research.

**William Vizuete, PhD**, professor of environmental sciences and engineering, has been named the Gillings School's first innovation strategy adviser. The inaugural role represents the School's commitment to building a robust culture of innovation, entrepreneurship and translation for direct impact in public health. Working closely with **Anne Glauber, MPH**, associate director of innovation at Gillings, and **Donald Holzworth, MS**, the School's entrepreneur in residence, Vizuete will advance transformative innovation solutions that address complex public health challenges.

**Barbara Turpin, PhD**, professor of environmental sciences and engineering, was selected to the United States Environmental Protection Agency's (EPA) Clean Air Scientific Advisory Committee (CASAC) last fall by Administrator **Michael S. Regan**. CASAC members span several scientific disciplines and provide sound scientific advice to EPA leadership.

A UNC research team led by Gillings School epidemiologist **Kari North, PhD**, has partnered with Texas Tech University and Vanderbilt University Medical Center (VUMC) to research anorexia nervosa (AN). The Sarah Kyle Anorexia Nervosa Research Foundation (SKANRF.org) has awarded its first Phase 1 grant to this research consortium, which seeks to uncover the biological mechanisms underlying AN by exploring epigenetic modifications that can influence gene expression without altering the DNA sequence itself. **Cynthia Bulik, PhD, FAED**, Distinguished Professor of psychiatry and a professor of nutrition at Gillings, chairs the SKANRF Scientific Advisory Board and is also involved with this project.

Professor of Nutrition **Anthony Hackney, PhD, DSc**, was recently named a Fulbright Scholar. Hackney will be associated with the PANIC study (Physical Activity and Nutrition in Children) at the University of Eastern Finland as the Fulbright-Saastamoinen Distinguished Chair in Health Sciences. It is his fourth experience as a Fulbright Scholar.

Gillings faculty received two of the first **Translating Innovative Ideas for the Public Good (TIIP) Awards**, which provide up to \$50,000 in support for innovative projects that embody the University's mission to drive research, invention and innovation for public benefit:

- **Oscar Fleming, DrPH, MSPH**, assistant professor in the Department of Public Health Leadership and Practice, for his project: Community Co-Design for Street Medicine in Burke County.
- **Melissa Cox, PhD**, assistant professor of health behavior for her project Building an Adaptive Mobile Intervention to Address High-Risk Alcohol Use.

The Teaching Excellence and Innovation Awards honor Gillings faculty members who inspire students; enhance student learning through creative, engaging and innovative teaching methods; and/or support student success in the classroom and student growth as public health professionals. The 2025 award winners are:

- **Kristen Hassmiller Lich, PhD**, professor of health policy and management, received one of the School's most prestigious awards, the Bernard G. Greenberg Alumni Endowment Award for teaching, research and service.
- **Jianwen Cai, PhD**, Cary C. Boshamer Distinguished Professor of biostatistics, received the John E. Larsh Jr. Award for Mentorship, one of the School's most prestigious awards, which recognizes the faculty member who best exemplifies the qualities of mentoring and commitment to students.
- **Melanie Studer, PhD**, assistant professor of health policy and management, received the Edward G. McGavran Award for Excellence in Teaching, which recognizes career-long excellence in teaching by a faculty member at the Gillings School.

Eight faculty members were awarded student-nominated Teaching Innovation Awards, which recognize one early-to-mid-career faculty member from each department. They are:

- **Lina Montoya, PhD**, assistant professor of biostatistics,
- **Greg Characklis, PhD**, W.R. Kenan Jr. Distinguished Professor of environmental sciences and engineering,
- **Jessie Buckley, PhD**, associate professor of epidemiology,
- **Larissa Jennings Mayo-Wilson, PhD**, associate professor of health behavior,
- **Franklin Farmer, DBA, MBA**, adjunct instructor in health policy and management,
- **Angela Parcesepe, PhD**, associate professor of maternal and child health,
- **Molly De Marco, PhD**, assistant professor of nutrition, and
- **W. Oscar Fleming, DrPH**, assistant professor of public health leadership and practice.

**Charletta Sims Evans** has been selected as the recipient of the 2025 ASPPH Student Services Excellence Award in recognition of her innovative, forward-thinking approach to student services and extraordinary dedication to working with applicants and students. The ASPPH Student Services Excellence Award recognizes individuals who have devoted their careers to innovating and improving the experience for applicants and students of public health programs. With over 20 years in higher education, counseling and mental health, Sims Evans leads the Office of Student Affairs in providing student outreach and recruitment, advising and counseling on academic and career choices, preventing and managing student disputes and grievances, and advising student organizations.

Biostatistics Professor **Hongtu Zhu, PhD**, has been named a 2025 IEEE Fellow. Each year, less than 1% of its voting members are selected for the prestigious fellowship. Zhu has been recognized for his contributions to data integration in medical imaging and genetics and applying learning in ridesharing.

Two 2025 Robert E. Bryan Public Service Awards were given to staff and programs at the Gillings School. **Addie Imseis**, project director in the Department of Public Health Leadership and Practice, was recognized for her outstanding work and leadership for the **Building Veteran-Healthy Communities Project**. The Place-Based Health MPH concentration also received special recognition for outstanding work with the Western N.C. community both before and after Hurricane Helene.

Two 2025 Office of the Provost awards were given to Gillings School faculty and programs for engaged research and partnership. **Leah Frerichs, PhD**, associate professor of health policy and management, was recognized for outstanding research in partnership with communities in Eastern N.C. to develop sustainable programming for adolescent youth engagement in local health-improvement initiatives. The **Fort Bragg Public Health Partnership** was also recognized for outstanding and ongoing work to address important health needs among military families in Fort Bragg.

## ALUMNI

**Lisa Koonin, DrPH**, 2013 doctoral program in Public Health Executive Leadership alumna, received the 2025 Harriet Hylton Barr Distinguished Alumni Award, which honors an alumnus or alumna for outstanding achievements and contributions to public health.

**Gary White, MS '94** (environmental sciences and engineering), received a Distinguished Alumni Award for his devotion to creating sustainable solutions that provide access to safe drinking water and sanitation to millions of people throughout the world. White leads Water.org and WaterEquity, two nonprofits he co-founded with actor Matt Damon which, since 2003, have helped provide access to safe water and sanitation for 70 million people in more than 18 countries.

**Amber Amparo**, a Bachelor of Science in Public Health graduate from the class of 2023, received a Fulbright Award to conduct research at the Netherlands Cancer Institute, studying how treatment strategies developed in the lab can be applied to pediatric neuroblastomas, a type of cancer that forms in nerve cells.

**Roberto Hernández Orsini, DMD, MPH, MS, (UNC MPH '86)**, has been named president-elect of the American Board of Orthodontics. He is an associate professor in the graduate orthodontic program at the University of Puerto Rico School of Dental Medicine and will be part of the executive, clinical and certification committees.

**Shelley Francis, DrPH**, 2005 Gillings School alumna, was named to the Transforming Transportation Advisory Committee (TTAC). The committee is to advise the Department of Transportation and the Secretary about plans and approaches for transportation innovation.

## EXAMPLES OF MAJOR GRANTS AND AWARDS

A team of UNC-Chapel Hill researchers that includes two Gillings faculty has been awarded up to \$10 million in Advanced Research Projects Agency for Health funding to develop the Cancer Identification and Precision Oncology Center, a multidisciplinary effort to improve cancer diagnosis and support personalized treatments by quickly aggregating and analyzing a wide range of health data. Principal investigators for the three-year project include **Caroline Thompson, PhD, MPH**, associate professor of epidemiology, and **Melissa Troester, PhD, MPH**, professor of epidemiology.

**Naim Rashid, PhD**, associate professor of biostatistics, has received a two-year, \$311,000 Department of Defense Pancreatic Cancer Research Program-focused pilot award to build an artificial intelligence tool that generates personalized clinical trial recommendations for patients with pancreatic ductal adenocarcinoma. **Michael Kosorok, PhD**, W. R. Kenan, Jr. Distinguished Professor of biostatistics at Gillings and professor of statistics and operations research, is another key project team member.

**Baiming Zou, PhD**, associate professor of biostatistics, received a grant (R01) from the National Institutes of Health to bring machine learning analysis to post-surgical pain and opioid use, with the goal of producing data-driven insights that will help physicians provide personalized pain management plans and avoid the risk of opioid overuse. Co-investigators include Gillings biostatistics professors **Fei Zou** and **Didong Li, PhD**.

## IN MEMORIAM

**Sagar Chand Jain, PhD**, a revered professor and health policy visionary, passed away Oct. 23, 2024, at age 94. Jain was professor emeritus of health policy and management at Gillings, a former department chair, and founding editor-in-chief of the *Journal of World Health & Population*. Born in India and immigrating to the United States in 1959, Jain joined UNC-Chapel Hill in 1965, serving the Department of Health Policy and Administration as a key faculty member and from 1971-1986 as department chair. His work was foundational in establishing the School's reputation for health policy and public health administration, expanding the curriculum and collaborating with organizations like the World Health Organization to enrich the School's academic programs and global outreach initiatives.

After retiring as department chair, Jain leveraged his health policy expertise to support the Indian Institute of Health Management Research (IIHMR) in its mission of improving health care management in India and South Asia. This partnership enabled IIHMR to adopt UNC's approaches to health systems strengthening and management training, equipping health care professionals with skills to tackle health challenges in low-resource settings. In his ancestral village of Dadawas, where his efforts centered on poverty alleviation through education and empowerment, Jain was instrumental in establishing the BMB School of Science and Mathematics. By creating educational resources, health care access and a support system for underprivileged

youth, Jain transformed Dadawas and modeled similar initiatives for rural communities across India.

**James Trotter Staley, PhD**, former assistant professor of environmental sciences and engineering, died Aug. 22, 2024, at the age of 86. Staley decided to pursue a career in science when the U.S. began to place more emphasis on science and technology after the Soviet Union launched Sputnik in 1957. He earned a Bachelor of Science degree in math from the University of Minnesota, a master's degree in microbiology from The Ohio State University, and a doctoral degree from the University of California, Davis. He taught Michigan State University's first microbial ecology course before coming to UNC in 1969 as assistant professor in the Department of Environmental Sciences and Engineering. In 1971, Staley left Chapel Hill to become a professor of microbiology at The University of Washington.

Staley was interested in microbial evolution and diversity and considered his life's work "Seeking Truth in the Microbial Cosmos." Among his research achievements were naming two new bacterial genera, writing and publishing textbooks (*Microbial Life* and *Microbiology Dynamics & Diversity*), and serving as the Founding Director of the UW Astrobiology Program from 1998-2005. Staley was a member of the American Society for Microbiology (ASM) for more than 50 years and received the U.S. Federation of Culture Collections J. Roger Porter Award from ASM in 2008.

**R. Gary Rozier, DDS, MPH**, a beloved and respected national expert on oral public health, died Jan. 29 at age 80. Rozier, who was professor emeritus of the HPM department, spent his career working to improve the oral health of low-income children in N.C. and across the U.S.

For more than 40 years, he served on the faculty of the Gillings School, teaching courses in public health dentistry and research design. He led the HPM doctoral program for several years and was an advisor to countless students. Rozier received his MPH and Doctor of Dental Surgery degrees from UNC-Chapel Hill.

"Dr. Rozier was a member of HPM from 1976 to 2019, where he spent his career designing and evaluating strategies to reduce oral health inequities in children," said **Kristin Reiter, PhD**, Humana Distinguished Professor and chair of HPM. "His work engaged physicians, dentists and community organizations such as Early Head Start in improving access to oral health preventive and treatment services for preschool-aged children. He was a remarkable teacher, mentor, researcher and colleague and a giant in the field of dental public health."

Educator, mentor and friend to so many, Rozier was a role model who inspired people across the globe. He conducted dental public health research with direct applications toward improving the public's health. He generously shared his time and research acumen. Perhaps his best-known research activities involved the development and evaluation of the "Into the Mouths of Babes" project that engaged and taught medical providers to conduct oral health screenings for young children, apply fluoride varnish and refer them to dentists. This innovative, interprofessional activity continues today. 📄



# Creating healthy communities for veterans in NC

A wide-ranging project at the UNC Gillings School of Global Public Health, Building Veteran-Healthy Communities (BVHC), is working with communities to better support the mental health of veterans and contribute to their overall sense of well-being.

Nearly 6,400 veterans died by suicide in 2021. With more than 700,000 veterans living in North Carolina and approximately 18 million across the United States, this crisis is making a profound impact on communities of all sizes.

Veteran well-being and suicide prevention are often addressed at the individual level from a clinical perspective. For example, at-risk veterans are often referred for clinical mental health services by their primary care provider. However, after an impromptu conversation at a workforce development conference between **Vaughn Upshaw, DrPH, EdD, MPH** – principal investigator of the BVHC project and chair of the Department of Public Health Leadership and Practice at the Gillings School – and **Paul Crews, MPH**, former director of the Durham Veterans Affairs

Pictured: Community leaders and advocates strategize on building healthier, more supportive environments for North Carolina veterans.

Health Care System, the idea for BVHC was born. Their shared public health background led them to agree that efforts to improve veteran well-being and suicide prevention should focus on communities.

The big-picture goal of the BVHC project is to support community efforts to become healthier places for veterans to live, and the project is specifically designed to work alongside community-based organizations with the understanding that they know their community best. The approach involves building awareness among local organizations of the unique issues veterans face when re-entering civilian life and fostering collaborations between the organizations to better address those issues. The project is also developing interactive resources that will provide information and tools to strategically support these community efforts. 📄

Learn more at [healthyvets.unc.edu](https://healthyvets.unc.edu).

# OUR RESEARCH MAKES ALL THE DIFFERENCE



Contact the Gillings School Advancement team to learn more about how you can help:

- [giving.sph@unc.edu](mailto:giving.sph@unc.edu)
- [go.unc.edu/SPHDeansPriorities](http://go.unc.edu/SPHDeansPriorities)

The Gillings School's work in public health is the foundation that can prevent disease, promote health and prolong life in communities.



## STATE OF NORTH CAROLINA

Our work prioritizes needs of people across N.C. We:

- Promote healthier lifestyles and help people make informed health choices.
- Improve prenatal care and infant nutrition, and reduce maternal and infant mortality.
- Significantly reduce opioid misuse and overdose deaths in N.C. – with death rates dropping 27% between 2023 and 2024.



## GENERATIVE AI

Our work in Generative AI is helping to transform public health by improving disease prevention and personalizing health care, reducing expenses, maximizing resources and boosting community health outcomes on a large scale. We:

- Use AI to screen for conditions like cancer and track the spread of infectious diseases.
- Develop large language models to support patients in adopting treatments.
- Support pregnancy care providers in low-resource settings with portable AI ultrasound devices.



## CLEAN AIR AND CLEAN WATER

Protecting our most vital resources – clean air and water – safeguards health and ensures a sustainable future. We:

- Conduct cutting-edge studies on pollution sources, their health impacts and effective interventions as they relate to air and water.
- Collaborate and share resources with local communities on best practices for water conservation, air quality improvement and pollution reduction.
- Develop innovative methods to address harmful chemicals in air and water, including PFAS.

# WHY I GIVE

“As a graduate of the Gillings School of Global Public Health, I have immensely valued the education I received from the nutrition department. While I was a student, I received financial support multiple times and promised once I was in the position to give back, I would. My current nutrition counseling business is doing well, and I owe much of its success to the education and support I received at Gillings.”

Julie Kennedy, MPH '18  
(nutrition)

Founder, Julie Kennedy Nutrition



”I have supported the Gillings School for years and intend to continue doing so because my degree, and my subsequent career, cemented my values and charted my course, including laying the perfect foundation for elected office later in life. I will always be grateful. I am hopeful that every alum will agree and feel compelled to give in acknowledgment of the skills, values and commitment to service and inquiry learned at their alma mater.”

Jackie Sergent, MPH '82  
(nutrition)

Former mayor, Oxford, NC



“I believe in giving back! My time at the Gillings School prepared me for an international career journey that I could never have imagined. Now it's my turn to assist others to realize their dreams.”

Erma Manoncourt, PhD '86  
(health behavior and education), MSW

President, M&D Consulting



**PLEASE CONTACT THE GILLINGS ADVANCEMENT  
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#1

## Still the number one *public* school of public health in the country

The Gillings School is, once again, the No. 1 *public* school of public health in the United States, according to the 2024-25 rankings from *U.S. News and World Report*. Thank you so much for your continued support!



## SUPPORT RESEARCH, EDUCATION AND PRACTICE THAT BENEFIT ALL

At the UNC Gillings School of Global Public Health, many members of our faculty and staff contribute both professionally and philanthropically to our work.

**Jeffrey Simms, MSPH**, is an educator, scholar and administrator at the Gillings School, and he is also a loyal donor. By donating through monthly payroll deduction, he provides a steady and reliable stream of support for the School.

Join Jeffrey in showing your support for the School's mission by making a gift today: [go.unc.edu/CPH25](https://go.unc.edu/CPH25)

*“As a graduate of and current faculty member in the Gillings School, I am committed to supporting our community through professional development, full-time job placements, internships and alumni engagement. Having grown up in rural Eastern North Carolina and as a first-generation college student, I appreciate the impact Gillings research and practice has in communities like the one I grew up in. I encourage you to consider making a gift to support our mission of building a healthier world for N.C. and beyond.”*



**Jeffrey Simms, MSPH '96**  
*(health policy and management)*  
Associate Chair, Alumni and External Affairs;  
Assistant Professor, Department of  
Health Policy and Management

Contact UNC Gillings Advancement at [email.sph@unc.edu](mailto:email.sph@unc.edu) or (919) 966-0198