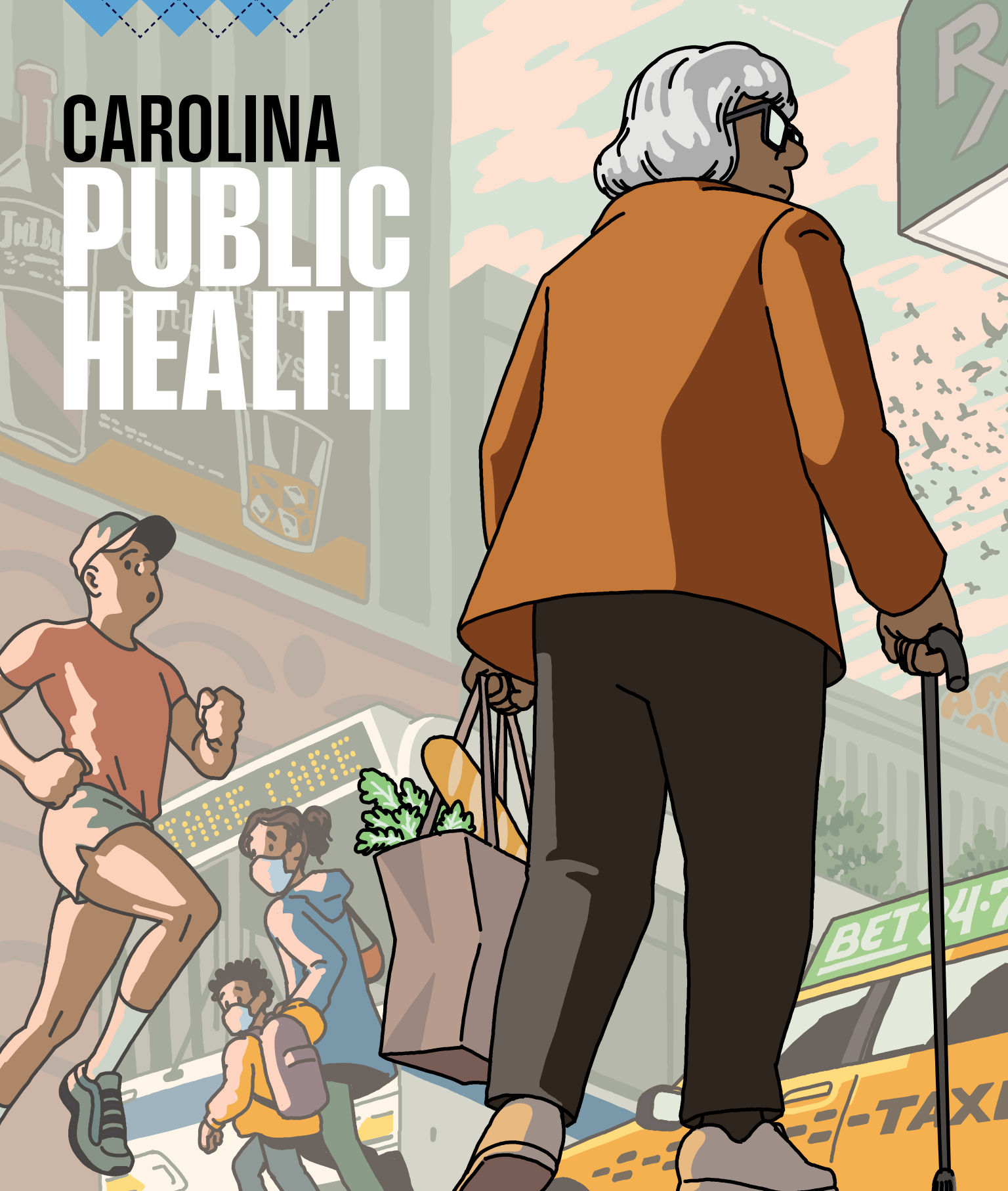


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Matthew Chamberlin

Managing Editor
Meg Palmer

Design and Production
AdrialDesigns.com

Contributing Writers: Will Frazier, Amy Fulk, Meg Palmer, Jennie Saia and Audrey Smith.

Cover Illustrator: BrittainPeck.com

Send correspondence to Editor, Carolina Public Health, UNC Gillings School of Global Public Health,
Campus Box 7400, Chapel Hill, NC 27599-7400, or email sphcomm@unc.edu.

Subscribe to Carolina Public Health: sph.unc.edu/cph

1,300 copies of this document were printed at a cost of \$9,267 or \$7.13 per copy.

Carolina Public Health (ISSN 1938-2790) is published by the UNC Gillings School of Global Public Health,
135 Dauer Dr., Campus Box 7400, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Chapel Hill, NC 27599-7400.

Spring 2026

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From Matthew Chamberlin
Associate Dean for Communications and Marketing

“Take care” may be a simple sign-off, but in public health it reflects a shared responsibility — one that asks us to look beyond ourselves and build conditions where everyone can thrive. Across North Carolina, our faculty, students and partners are strengthening trust, expanding access and meeting communities where they are. These stories show what’s possible when care is intentional, collaborative and rooted in the needs of people and places.



For many of us,
“TAKE CARE”
is something we say almost automatically.

It's how we sign an email. It's the last thing we say before hanging up the phone. It's a small expression of goodwill and a wish for others to be well.

But in public health, “take care” carries deeper meaning. It's not only a personal sentiment; it's a collective responsibility. To take care is to look beyond ourselves and ask what people need to thrive — not just today but across lifetimes and generations.

At the UNC Gillings School of Global Public Health, taking care means strengthening the systems that support health and well-being for all. It means building trust, expanding possibilities, and ensuring communities have the knowledge and resources they need to live healthier lives.

In this issue of *Carolina Public Health*, you'll see many examples of what that commitment looks like in practice.

Some of this work begins with trust — a foundational element of public health that has never been more important. Our faculty are examining how trust is built

and sustained (and sometimes lost), and how we can strengthen the relationships between communities, health systems and public health institutions.

In one story, you'll travel to Burke County, North Carolina, where the Gillings School and local community organizations are collaborating on street medicine. By meeting people who are unhoused in the places where they spend their days, providers are able to deliver essential care earlier and more consistently. This approach improves the health of individuals who too often fall through the cracks of traditional systems while reducing strain on emergency departments and hospitals. It's a powerful reminder that when care reaches the people who need it most, entire communities benefit.

Other stories highlight how we care for communities across the lifespan. From improving cancer screenings and promoting healthy nutrition for athletes, to supporting an aging population with innovative research and policy solutions, our faculty and students are advancing science that helps all people live longer, healthier lives.

Of course, taking care also means preparing and supporting the next generation of public health leaders. For a school of public health, education is one of the most powerful ways we can strengthen the future of our field.

In a time of rapid technological change, our faculty members are exploring how tools like artificial intelligence can enhance teaching and learning while we preserve the critical thinking and human connection that define public health research and practice.

And in the face of evolving funding challenges that are affecting public health nationwide, we remain committed to supporting our students and alumni — ensuring they have the tools, mentorship and connections they need to continue their important work in communities across North Carolina and around the world.

Public health, at its core, is about the conditions that allow people to not just survive but flourish.

This is reflected in our faculty feature on ensuring safe water access in maternity hospitals so both parents and newborns can experience a healthy start. It is there when a researcher works to prevent alcohol overuse among students so that young people can thrive during a formative time in their lives. It is the reason we strengthen communities: so that health is not a privilege but a shared foundation.

These efforts remind us that care is not abstract. It is built through policies, programs, research and relationships that shape the environments where people live, learn, work and play.



In a world facing complex and interconnected health challenges, the mission of public health is clearer than ever. We must continue to work together — across disciplines, sectors and borders — to ensure everyone has the opportunity to live a healthy life.

That work is not always easy, but it is profoundly meaningful.

So when we say “take care” to one another, we are expressing more than a farewell.

We are naming the purpose that unites our School and our field: a commitment to care for one another, to care for our communities and to build a healthier future for all.

Please do take care. 🌱

Dr. Nancy Messonnier

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

REBUILDING TRUST IN PUBLIC HEALTH

Authenticity matters

Public health is everywhere, every day — yet Americans' trust in it continues to wane. In a world where information overload, TikTok-length attention spans, and division and insularity collide, UNC Gillings School faculty hope to strengthen the bonds of trust between the field of public health and the residents it aims to serve.

"There's a general increased distrust in institutions: People feel that they're very separate from them, that they're out of touch," said Professor of Nutrition **Lindsey Smith Taillie, PhD**, one of several faculty members working on ways the Gillings School can improve trust. "We've moved too far apart — and that's where misinformation can flow, because we've lost that connection."

Technology, both as a source of information and a substitute for human connection, is a key factor. Even people who are not active technology users can be influenced by friends and family who are, said **Alessandra Bazzano, PhD, MPH**, chair of the Department of Maternal and Child Health.

Bazzano created a course to examine how different technologies and platforms can shape the spread of information and misinformation, and the commercial or political motives behind certain posts or reels. The class explores how to leverage social media, AI and other tools not just to help sort out good information from bad but to better connect with others.

"Public health officials need to be more engaged online. That's where everybody is increasingly



going for their health information," she said, but the conversation can't just be about health. "We have to go beyond sharing health information and start telling stories, because stories are what social media is all about. We have to connect on values."

Shared values and trusted relationships often lie within community groups and places of faith. A new course taught by **Karl Johnson, PhD**, assistant professor of public health leadership and practice, and **Kim Ramsey-White, PhD**, associate dean for well-being and associate professor of public health leadership and practice, aims to help students better understand the role faith communities play in public health.

When he's not teaching, Johnson works with Granville County's health department. One of his projects is Faith in Mental Health, a collaborative initiative that helps churches address community mental health needs and substance abuse issues. "We often depend on technical expertise to solve problems, but the evidence-based techniques we use in public health exist within a culture of nontechnical relationships: relationships of care, embodiment and presence, where you don't just solve problems," he said. "The crisis in trust is that we've overstepped in terms of how far our technical expertise can lead us. Interpersonal relationships and authentic trust-building require time and sacrifice. There's no shortcut."

Trust and technical expertise go hand in hand, especially when dealing with public health threats where unverified or changing information can put people at risk. **John Wallace, PhD, MSPH**, and **John Wiesman, DrPH, MPH**, co-directors of the Region 4 Center for Public Health Preparedness and Response, are supporting strategic planning to address rumors and misinformation as part of a Centers for Disease Control and Prevention-funded effort to strengthen public health preparedness and response across states in the southeastern U.S.

One of the most effective approaches, they found, is for agencies to build relationships with community organizations and local leaders who can help tackle rumors and make sure the right information reaches those who need it. "The community needs to trust the messenger, but the messenger also needs to trust the system they are advocating for," said Wiesman, professor of the practice in health policy and management.


Their goal is for agencies to incorporate evidence-based protocols into their preparedness and response plans. "If you have a plan, you have these standardized processes and protocols built in," said Wallace, senior data advisor for the N.C. Institute for Public Health. "When a public health threat occurs, you use those protocols and work through your trusted community contacts."

While community and personal relationships are more common in practice, they're essential in research, said **Stephanie Wheeler, PhD, MPH**, Michael S. O'Malley Distinguished Professor of health policy and management and associate director of the UNC Lineberger Comprehensive Cancer Center's Office of Community Outreach and Engagement.

"You can't do public health effectively if you're not engaged in

personal relationships to identify what the right research question should be, and to really listen and be responsive throughout the entire process," Wheeler said. "And once we have results, they need to be returned to the community that is experiencing the problem. That is a really important element to the science."

Schoolwide discussions about how the Gillings School can lead in trust-building are preliminary. But to break through the bots, algorithms, and social and cultural bubbles to truly connect with people, public health must change how it operates online and in real life.

"It's not just teaching someone how to write a scientific manuscript anymore. It's: How do you talk to communities in a meaningful way and understand the needs they have and do work that speaks to them?" Taillie said. "I have faith that if we can create shared spaces where we're actually together, we can change things." 



TAKING PUBLIC HEALTH TO THE STREET

The story of Burke County's street medicine program is one of partnership between a rural North Carolina health department and an academic institution joining forces to combat a public health crisis. Their work became a prime example of the strength an academic health department model can bring to public health systems.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, North Carolina experienced an unusually high increase in hepatitis A outbreaks.

A viral illness that causes liver inflammation, hepatitis A is typically transmitted person-to-person or through food contamination. The infection is not long-lasting, but it can become severe enough to cause hospitalization or death. While a vaccine exists, most adults in the United States have never received it, given that it only became part of pediatric immunization requirements in the late 1990s.

Outbreaks of this disease have fluctuated over time, but a large spike in cases is cause for major public health concern, especially when the disease transmits in communities that don't have easy access to health care. This was the case in 2021 in Burke County, N.C., which saw the highest rates of hepatitis A in the state due to an outbreak among the county's unhoused population.

The mobile bus clinic in the parking lot of Burke United Christian Ministries in Morganton, NC.



N.C.'s public health system is largely decentralized, meaning while the N.C. Department of Health and Human Services oversees many policies and programs, the health care services and day-to-day decision-making are left to individual counties. For a small, rural county like Burke, handling a spike in hepatitis A cases during the middle of a coronavirus pandemic strained the health department's resources. Assistant Health Director Ashley Jarrett, DNP, RN, CPH, who at the time was working as a communicable disease nurse at the health department, knew they would need to lean on community organizations and resources to address the outbreaks.

"We worked with the State of N.C. to find out who was being impacted the most," said Jarrett. "People who were injecting drugs, people experiencing homelessness and men who had sex with men. I was able to identify organizations in Burke County that could take care of two of those communities, but no one was taking care of the homeless population."

"We knew there were people out there who needed our help," said Health Director Danny Scalise, MPH, MBA. "It started with health department employees, police officers, volunteers and folks at the UNC hospital here collecting donations and then going out into encampments. Street medicine."

Street medicine can take many forms — mental health services, mobile clinics, temporary shelters, distribution of food or sleeping bags — but it all has one goal: bringing care directly to people experiencing homelessness. Not only does it improve health for vulnerable people and their community; it also builds trust and creates opportunities for non-judgmental, respectful health care relationships

"It was just as much about giving out hygiene and health checks to as it was about the things people would consider traditional health care," Scalise explained.

Together, Burke County Public Health worked with the community to deliver necessary vaccines and medical supplies to the county's unhoused population. It gave the team at the health department a glimpse



of what a broader and more intentional effort to bring real-time health care to the homeless — street medicine — might look like beyond treating hepatitis A. This level of outreach had strong support from the community but was difficult to sustain long term without the material and technical resources necessary to build an efficient system that could deliver other facets of health, like primary care, maternal health or mental health services.

Jarrett and Scalise, through their network, connected with **Oscar Fleming, DrPH**, assistant professor in public health leadership and practice at the UNC Gillings School of Global Public Health. Fleming's expertise in improving methods to expand the capacity of the public health workforce was a natural fit for Burke County's goals in creating a formal street medicine program. As part of its mission to strengthen local public health agencies in the state, the Gillings School has a strong history of building partnerships with county health departments — most recently through its Partnership Hubs initiative in Cumberland, Durham, Halifax and

“EVEN SMALL CHANGES IN POLICY MAKE CRITICAL IMPACTS IN THE PEOPLE WE’RE TRYING TO SERVE.”



Assistant Health Director Ashley Jarrett, DNP, RN, CPH

Jackson counties. These partnerships provide tools, expertise and personnel support that can help health departments improve well-being in their counties.

After one phone call with Jarrett, Fleming was eager to assist in developing a street medicine outreach program that could last beyond a single disease outbreak. Most models for street medicine in other parts of the country are designed for urban areas, where density and resources facilitate the delivery of health care services. Burke County, by contrast, is small and rural, with only one major population center: Morganton.

Fleming saw a need and an opportunity to design a unique model that could address a rural county’s needs.

“Country roads medicine,” as Scalise called it.

The street medicine partnership between the Gillings School and Burke County has evolved over two years to become much more formalized thanks to the design thinking and evaluation methods from the Gillings School team combined with dedication of the health department staff, paramedics, Morganton Public Safety, and community organizations like Burke United Christian Ministries and Grace Episcopal Church. At its core, the Burke Street Medicine Team provides

AND IT’S GOING TO MAKE WORK LIKE THIS MORE IMPORTANT THAN EVER.”

high-quality care to unhoused people in parks and encampments, establishes shelters during extreme weather (“Code Purple” shelters), and leverages community volunteers and donations for things like hygiene supplies. The Gillings School also supports the county through practicum opportunities, giving public health students the chance to put their classroom learning into practice as they help the health department design and deliver care in evolving ways.

The partnership has flourished despite limited financial resources, thanks to the dedication and passion of all parties involved. Jarrett says she’s grateful for the sweat equity that Fleming has put into the project, incorporating it into his coursework and finding new sources of funding, such as the Translating Innovative Ideas for the Public Good awards from Innovate Carolina, that allow for flexibility and ideation.

“When it comes to people experiencing homelessness, it’s never just about the people experiencing the homelessness,” she said. “It’s about every single body and every single system involved. So, the beauty of this is that while we don’t have much funding, we’re doing so much more systems change through reducing stigma, building networks and improving leadership in this area at the local government level.”

“WE REALIZED THAT WE NEEDED TO TALK TO FOLKS IN THE COMMUNITY ABOUT WHAT WAS NEEDED... WE WANTED TO REALLY UNDERSTAND THE BEST WAY TO BRING CARE TO THEM.”

As the project has evolved, Fleming and **Minzhi Xing, MD, MPH**, assistant professor in public health leadership and practice, have worked with Burke County to launch a mobile women’s health clinic that brings services to those in need — whether they’re unhoused, living with a friend or simply lack transportation. Xing has also received funding from the N.C. Collaboratory to undertake community-engaged mapping, evaluation, and strengthening of mental and behavioral health programs and systems in Burke County. Together with Kristen Hassmiller Lich, PhD, professor in health policy and management, the systems-strengthening effort emphasizes shared leadership alongside the health department and community partners.

“At the heart of this mutually beneficial partnership is our profound respect for one another’s expertise,” said Xing. “The local health department serves as the county’s chief health strategist and convenor, while communities hold invaluable insight into their own assets, living experiences and conditions that shape effective public health solutions.”



Associate Professor Oscar Fleming, DrPH

The ultimate goal for Scalise and Fleming is to create a formal academic health department relationship, similar to the Partnership Hubs, which can help local government public health workers evaluate both the street medicine program and other work in which the county can lead.

“When you go into a teaching hospital, the clinical faculty is the attending physician and the teacher; I want to see that same type of thing here,” said Scalise, “where the faculty is the person doing the work in practice, and they’re also teaching. They could be teaching students or enriching our employees through things like program evaluation that could make them better at their jobs.”

Jarrett said that recent policy changes criminalizing homelessness have made their work more difficult, and that, more broadly, the defunding of public health services will have impacts for years to come. Policies that erode public trust in institutions and stigmatize important benefits, like housing vouchers and Medicaid, make it harder for people without resources to gain access to health care.

“Even small changes in policy make critical impacts in the people we’re trying to serve,” she said. “And it’s going to make work like this more important than ever.”

Gillings Career Services Cares for Students and Alumni Amid Federal Funding Cuts

Last year's federal funding cuts sent shockwaves through the public health field, leading to reduced services, federal health agency layoffs and an intensely competitive job market. With fewer job opportunities for new graduates and seasoned professionals, Gillings Career Services switched into crisis mode.

The impact of layoffs was clearly noticeable in the sudden shift in demand for Career Services appointments. "Historically, about 75% of my appointments have been with students and about 25% with alumni. However, after last year's public health cuts, that flipped and for several months about 75% of my meetings were with alumni who needed immediate assistance," said **Derek Just, MEd**, assistant director for student and alumni career services.

The team, which also includes **Gregory Bocchino, EdD**, and **Lidia Colato Raez, MEd**, provides a full slate of career services offerings to current students and school alumni. The Career Services team offers one-on-one appointments, hosts webinars and live events, and provides coaching on topics such as interviewing, resume preparation and networking.

Meeting students and alumni where they are

In the aftermath of funding cuts and workforce reductions, many people came to Career Services for help preparing resumes, cover letters and LinkedIn profiles for a job search. Others who came in for appointments were doing a more significant recalibration and questioning if there was still work for them in the field or if they needed to make a career pivot. These appointments required a more personal approach.

"Meeting with a student or someone who was laid off shortly after taking a position looks very different

from meeting with someone who was laid off after working at an agency for a decade and hadn't touched their resume during that time," Just said. "Many people's lives were completely disrupted when they suddenly lost a job that they had always believed was secure, and they weren't sure how they would afford their day care and mortgage payments."

Bocchino convened a Career Services Workgroup at the Gillings School with representation from faculty and staff across every academic department, along with key partners from the Office of Global Health, advancement and the Master of Public Health practicum team. The workgroup is intentionally structured to strengthen career event planning, enhance collaborations and deepen engagement with departments, students, alumni and external partners.

Providing steady support in a disrupted job market

Fouad Abu-Hijleh '22 was working at the public health and education organization JSI, on projects funded by the United States Agency for International Development when funding cuts led to a stop-work order and his being laid off in February last year. He quickly scheduled a virtual appointment with Just, who helped him think through the brain shift and resume updates necessary to apply to jobs in the private sector.

"I was looking for help at a time when everyone else was looking for help, and all of my former bosses and colleagues were also drowning," said Abu-Hijleh, who started a new role as a senior analyst at CVS in July 2025. "I'm so grateful for the Gillings Career Services team because they were like a life raft. They reminded me that I wasn't alone and offered an array of resources so that I could easily reach in and take the specific resources I needed."



Aria Gray '17 was a part of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' reduction in force last year. She set up a virtual appointment with Just, who helped her update her resume and connected her with the Heels Engage platform and other job-hunting resources.


"There were so many resources being shared at the time, especially living in Washington, D.C., that it was overwhelming trying to figure out where to begin and what was worth the time," said Gray, who began another position at HHS in December 2025. "With Gillings Career Services I was able to receive high-quality services quickly. And all the work I did with Derek Just had me well-prepared when someone in my network reached out about a position."

Simplifying job searches

Job searches require taking many steps, but the Career Services team recommends that job seekers begin the process by identifying all of the resources available to them. And for Gillings students and alumni, many resources are available. The Gillings group within the Heels Engage alumni engagement platform is a great starting point, as

it serves as a one-stop shop for every career services resource, including checklists to guide a successful job search. The Gillings Career Services LinkedIn page is also a useful resource, where the team reposts jobs and shares resources almost every day.

The Career Services team has also collaborated to include their work in the MPH program and the Health Equity Alumni Panel, and they have coordinated marketing of global health-related job opportunities. This year, they are partnering again with the North Carolina Division of Public Health (NCDPH) to convene alumni, current students and NCDPH leaders for a focused opportunity to network and learn about career pathways and opportunities in state public health.

"We're constantly evolving and working to be responsive to the changing needs of students and alumni," Just said. "We take care of our students and alumni by listening to them, staying on top of the job market, providing them up-to-date resources and tailored coaching, and continually developing relationships with employers. We do all this to help them reach their career goals, whatever they might be." 



Aging Requires an *Ecosystem of Care*

As Americans grow older, more adults face complex and chronic health issues that can't be managed through individual effort alone. Older adults require coordinated care as they navigate challenges like loss of mobility, chronic diseases and cognitive decline, all in the face of caregiver shortages.

Faculty at the Gillings School support older adults across the ecosystem of geriatric care, leading research, training and clinical work that helps people age in healthier and more independent ways.

Empowering home and community-based care

Most older adults want to age in place. But for that to be a reality, many people will require a host of services spanning in-home health care plus cleaning, food preparation and assistance with daily activities like bathing. To address this need, the Gillings School launched the Home and Community-Based Service (HCBS) Leadership Program in partnership with ADvancing States. The program, which launched last year, provides workforce training to those in long-term services and supports-related roles.

The 10-week course uses online modules written by **Erin Kent, PhD**, associate professor and associate chair for research in health policy and management, **Karen Volmar, JD, MPH, FACHE**, professor and associate chair for academic programs in health policy and management, and Anne Jacobs '93 of Riverstone Health Advisors, with expert consultation from ADvancing States. The course trains participants on the fundamentals of home and community-based services administration, with modules covering HCBS policies, financing and service delivery details. This is helpful to many working in the field who feel that they know the specifics of their individual program but need a better understanding of the overall system and how everything connects in home and community-based care.

"This program facilitates connections for care," said Volmar. "By helping people receive the services and supports they need where they need them, we're maximizing their ability to live a life that reflects their goals."

Improving mobility and function

Maintaining physical function is essential for older adults who want to remain in their own home and enjoy a higher quality of life as they age. The health promotion work of Associate Professor **John Batsis, MD**, with older adults focuses on maintaining and improving physical function with the help of diet and exercise by using technology. Batsis, who is a geriatrician-researcher and associate professor in medicine and nutrition, currently runs a behavioral weight loss intervention for older adults. The trial compares results from those working with health coaches on behavioral problem-solving strategies to those working with dietitians and physical therapists in a more structured, medicalized approach. Batsis is also working with a startup company to develop a resistance exercise band that is Bluetooth-enabled and can be used by older adults for home-based physical therapy.

His previous projects have explored the use of FitBits and telemedicine, and he is now evaluating how new weight loss drugs affect older adults.

Making diabetes management technology more accessible

Older adults also face more difficulties when it comes to managing chronic diseases. Continuous glucose monitors (CGM) have become the cornerstone of diabetes management for people using insulin. However, studies show that adults aged 65+ adopt CGMs at a much lower rate compared to their youth and younger adult counterparts.

Anna Kahkoska, MD, PhD, Joan Heckler Gillings Assistant Professor in nutrition, is leading a new clinical trial, funded by the American Diabetes Association, that is focused on the education and training that older adults may receive to learn how to use continuous glucose monitoring as part of their diabetes management. As a part of the trial, Kahkoska is studying how to innovate — ultimately to individualize — CGM training to make it most effective.

"We have evidence that the use of CGMs can be a powerful tool for optimized diabetes management and

outcomes among older adults with diabetes who use insulin," said Kahkoska. "But it's a complex intervention, and we know that older adults may need extra education or support in different areas, especially if they've had fewer interactions with technology or have been managing their diabetes with fingersticks for decades. We hope to learn about how we can improve the training provided to older adults to make this technology more accessible to all people with diabetes, regardless of how old they are."

Understanding neurodegenerative disease

Cognitive decline often adds another layer of complexity in managing older adults' health. **Hongtu Zhu, PhD**, Kenan Distinguished Professor in biostatistics, integrates patient data from brain imaging scans, genetic testing, clinical assessments and electronic health records and lifestyle factors to better understand how Alzheimer's disease develops over time.

"Alzheimer's is a very complicated, heterogeneous disease," said Zhu. "We're integrating data from all available domains so we can look at humans as a dynamic system and model different Alzheimer's disease trajectories across time. We're also evaluating which factors are modifiable — such as drugs, exercise and nutrition — and how they can change patient trajectories."

Zhu and his team hope that a more robust understanding of the disease's pathways and more nuanced disease subtyping with tailored interventions will improve the standard of Alzheimer's disease care in the future.

Complex needs require individualized support

Researchers and clinicians at the Gillings School understand that older adults require a connected system of care that should be directed by their unique health goals.

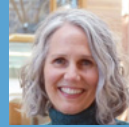
"We shouldn't be using a one-size-fits-all approach with anyone, but especially not with older adults who are dealing with complexity upon complexity," said Batsis. "This is an area where we really have to individualize care." 🌐



YESENIA MERINO,
PHD, MPH
ASSISTANT PROFESSOR
OF HEALTH BEHAVIOR



ALESSANDRA N. BAZZANO, PHD
CHAIR AND PROFESSOR
OF MATERNAL AND
CHILD HEALTH



ANNE GLAUBER, MPH
DIRECTOR OF
INNOVATION

HOW DO I TALK ABOUT AI IN PUBLIC HEALTH?

OPPORTUNITIES

SUPPORTING THE PUBLIC HEALTH WORKFORCE

AI tools can help public health professionals manage heavy workloads, especially in agencies facing growing responsibilities and limited resources. When used thoughtfully, AI can automate parts of routine workflows, support disease surveillance and strengthen health promotion and education. With human oversight, these tools can improve efficiency while preserving professional judgment and expertise. Rather than replacing people, responsible AI use can reinforce foundational public health capabilities, allowing teams to focus on complex decisions, community relationships and preventive action.

INNOVATIVE PUBLIC HEALTH SOLUTIONS

By expanding access to research, data and evidence-based information, AI has the potential to power new tools and interventions, particularly for communities that struggle to find or apply relevant health information. Faculty at the Gillings School are developing AI-driven language models, chatbots, data systems and screening tools to address real-world health challenges. Supported by the Center for AI and Public Health, these efforts bring interdisciplinary expertise to responsible development and application. AI also enables rapid prototyping, helping researchers test ideas, assess usability and gather feedback before making larger investments.

MEANINGFUL POLICY DISCUSSIONS

As AI capabilities expand, public health leaders can shape policies that promote transparency, accountability and ethical innovation. By setting guardrails, experts help protect communities while encouraging responsible use across health care, research and society.

Artificial intelligence (AI) technology has seen widespread adoption in public health data spaces — and in seemingly every corner of our lives. This presents public health with an opportunity to thoughtfully consider how AI will be used, and how it will shape the ways we care for people. It's no longer a question of if but HOW we will integrate AI into our research, teaching and practice. Public health has a duty to lead in conversations about how this technology can be used responsibly and ethically.

CHALLENGES

ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACTS

AI systems rely on data centers that consume large amounts of electricity and water. These facilities are often built in rural areas where land is less expensive, shifting environmental and economic burdens onto nearby communities. Residents may experience increased infrastructure strain and resource costs long before shortages become visible, raising concerns about long-term sustainability and environmental justice.

LOSS OF SKILLS AND EXPERTISE

Although AI is often described as an assistant, effective oversight depends on strong foundational knowledge. Emerging research suggests that excessive reliance on AI, especially during learning and training, can hinder the development of critical thinking and problem-solving skills in both children and adults. Delegating complex tasks to AI can create “cognitive debt,” reducing people’s ability to evaluate information, detect errors and apply contextual understanding in professional and academic settings.

HALLUCINATIONS AND BIAS

AI tools can produce confident but incorrect outputs, including fabricated information known as hallucinations. In addition, AI systems may reflect biases embedded in their training data and design. Without intentional, inclusive human oversight, these tools risk reinforcing systemic inequities and perpetuating harm to underserved communities.

WHAT CAN YOU DO?

Remember that AI use is a choice. AI remains optional in many settings, and people may have valid reasons to limit or avoid its use.

Maintain human judgment. AI works best as a support tool, not a replacement for expertise or critical thinking.

Use AI intentionally. Clear, thoughtful prompting improves outputs while reducing environmental and resource costs.

Stay engaged and curious. Ongoing discussion, learning and inclusive leadership are essential as AI continues to evolve.



MEREDITH HENDERSON

Human Resources Team Lead

What most interests you about your job? What I really enjoy most about my job is supporting the people doing such meaningful work in public health! I often work with faculty in complex roles, and I value being someone they can rely on for clarity and guidance, especially as it relates to the appointments, promotions and tenure process. When I can remove confusion, streamline steps or simply make someone's experience less stressful, I know I'm helping create the space they need to focus on their research, teaching or service. Even though I work in HR, I feel connected to the Gillings School's mission because I'm helping create the support system that allows them to focus on what they do best.

How do you unwind? I really try to unwind by getting outside and moving. Running is one of my favorite ways to clear my head — it gives me time to think, reset and decompress. I also love being in nature, whether that's on a trail or just spending time outdoors. There's something about fresh air that helps me recharge.

What do you think is the biggest issue in public health today? I'm not a mental health expert, but I see it as one of the biggest public health challenges today. There's growing demand for support, and access to services isn't always equal. Mental health also impacts everything — work, school, families, overall well-being — so it's hard to separate it from other public health

issues. In my HR role, I think a big part of supporting faculty and staff is helping create systems and environments that reduce barriers, normalize conversations about well-being and make resources easier to access. Even though I'm not on the research side, I feel like I can contribute by helping the people side of public health work as smoothly and sustainably as possible.



FITZGERALD YOUNG

Human Resources Team Lead

What most interests you about your job? What interests me most about my job is getting to be part of the behind-the-scenes work that keeps operations running smoothly. I love meeting and collaborating with so many different people across the School. I enjoy watching business strategy evolve into the staffing plan, and it's rewarding to know that my work plays a role in the School's overall success.

How do you unwind? Lately, meditation and long trail walks have become my favorite ways to unwind and unplug.

What do you think is the biggest issue in public health today? There are so many issues in public health, but one of the biggest is the rapid spread of misinformation and disinformation. Those false narratives shape people's health decisions, affect mental well-being and erode trust in public health agencies. It's an issue that affects every part of the system.



RHESIA LEWIS MEd

*Assistant Director
of Operations,
Dean's Office*

What most interests you about your job? Gillings has great people and I enjoy working here. So many people here are dedicated to their jobs and keeping the public healthy. For that reason, I enjoy being able to host community-building events that bring faculty and staff together and celebrate their accomplishments.

How do you unwind? I enjoy curling up with my cat, Luna, watching TV or reading a good book. I also enjoy doing diamond painting, puzzles and painting.

What do you think is the biggest issue in public health today? In my view, it's the growing lack of trust from the general public. It's disheartening to watch faculty, staff and students dedicate themselves to improving health and building a better world, only to be met with skepticism and distrust.

GREG BOCCHINO EdD, MEd

*Senior Executive Director for Career Services
and Professional Development*

What most interests you about your job? What most interests me about my job is that Career Services sits at the intersection of students, alumni, staff, faculty and employers. You're constantly connecting people, ideas and opportunities. That cross-collaboration makes the work engaging, meaningful and deeply impactful.

How do you unwind? At the end of each semester, I intentionally build in time to step away and reset. I try to take a trip that helps me fully disconnect and recharge before the next academic semester begins. In December, for example, I spent time in Aruba completely unplugged, on the beach, reading and just slowing down. This June, I'll be heading to Portugal, which will be a different kind of recharge that is more exploring, great food and experiencing a new place. I've realized I need different kinds of breaks at different points in the year.

What do you think is the biggest issue in public health today? From where I sit in the career space, one of the biggest issues in public health right now is workforce sustainability. I'm paying close attention to the job market, the broader economy, burnout and the growing competitiveness facing both early-career

professionals and seasoned alumni. We often see headlines about funding instability or workforce cuts, and those are real concerns. But I'm also focused on the long-term picture, what skills are actually in demand, which sectors are hiring, and how we prepare public health professionals to be resilient and adaptable in a changing landscape.



Brent Wishart, facilities manager, has been taking care of the Gillings School's building logistics for more than twenty years, guiding the school through both crises and everyday emergencies that come with managing a campus ...

... including on-campus shootings, tornado warnings, ice storms, interior floods, leaking roof and more. His office is a microcosm of the School's vast public health legacy.

WHERE DO I DO

PUBLIC HEALTH

Dr. Rosenau's **microscope and eyeglasses** have remained with his portrait for the past 73 years and serve as tangible symbols of his life's work. The microscope reflects his scientific rigor and commitment to advancing public health knowledge, while his glasses offer a more personal reminder of the human perspective behind that scholarship.

The **"King of Parking"** certificate was a lighthearted creation by the Dean's Office staff many years ago, and it still makes me smile. The yellow construction hard hat dates to the 2002-2005 construction of the Michael Hooker Research Center. For me, it represents both the physical evolution of our spaces and the collective effort required to bring bold ideas to life.

The 1928 **lamp model of the Old Well** is another piece that reflects my appreciation for UNC's history. I've always enjoyed finding vintage Carolina artifacts, and this lamp is one of my favorites.

Utilizing a **round table** invites colleagues to gather as partners, which helps bring people together around shared space and strategy decisions.

I keep the 1953 **portrait of Dean Milton Rosenau** in my office as a daily reminder of the legacy that shaped our school. The portrait originally hung in a display case outside my first office in Rosenau Hall. When that case was removed during the 2007 building renovation, he drifted from office to office before ultimately being placed in storage. I felt strongly that someone should reclaim that visible connection to our history, so when I moved into this office, I made sure Dr. Rosenau came with me.



IMPROVING CANCER CARE AT EVERY STEP

A cancer diagnosis complicates life for patients, who have to quickly navigate a series of difficult decisions with limited information. Gillings School researchers and clinicians are working to fill in those information gaps. Their work improves cancer care at every step of the process, from making screening more accessible to making treatment more precise.

Much of this work happens through close collaboration with the UNC Lineberger Comprehensive Cancer Center, the only public National Cancer Institute-designated Comprehensive Cancer Center in North Carolina. It is also strengthened by state funding that supports research innovation and expands access to evidence-based care across the state.

Where diagnosis happens matters

Caroline Thompson, PhD, MPH, associate professor in epidemiology, studies how patients move through the health care system and the circumstances around cancer diagnoses. Cancer can be detected through proactive screenings like mammograms; incidentally, like when someone has an X-ray following a car accident and it reveals cancer; or, most commonly, after patients begin experiencing cancer symptoms and seek medical care.

Many patients, especially in rural areas, don't have access to regular primary care and may go to an emergency room when they first experience these symptoms. Thompson's team has found that receiving a cancer diagnosis in an emergency room is associated with worse outcomes, including delayed care and lower survival rates.

"We're trying to understand patient journeys and generate data that health systems can use to optimize care and improve outcomes for those who receive an emergency room cancer diagnosis," said Thompson.

New approaches to cancer screening

Many researchers in the Gillings School are working to make cancer screening more accessible.

Jennifer S. Smith, PhD, professor in epidemiology, has evaluated human papillomavirus (HPV) self-collection kit outreach as a means of reaching under-served women who may lack health insurance or have other barriers to in-office screening. HPV tests play an important role in early detection of cervical cancer since HPV is an essential cause of cervical cancer. Smith and her team found that at-home HPV self-collection outreach doubled screening uptake among under-screened women as compared to offering in-clinic scheduling assistance alone and that at-home HPV self-collection was cost-effective.

"Cervical cancer is highly preventable. We really want to increase life-saving screening by bringing tests to those under-screened. Mailing self-collection kits allows women to save time and screen themselves in the privacy of their own homes — leading to two-fold higher screening coverage in our My Body My Test trial," said Smith.

Stephanie Wheeler, PhD, MPH, the Michael S. O'Malley Distinguished Professor in health policy and management, has supported multiple cancer screening projects throughout the state

by partnering with community health center primary care practices through the CAPRICORN initiative and by evaluating the cost-effectiveness of these initiatives. These projects build capacity for evidence-based cancer screening in communities through training, technical assistance and electronic health record support. In one community health center clinic in northeastern North Carolina, this work yielded a more than 30 percentage point gain in colorectal cancer screening over the past 10 years (going from 34% to 65% screening).

“Our close partnerships with these important community providers serving low-income, underinsured and rural communities have helped increase use of evidence-based practices, build workforce capacity, and build the business case for focusing on screening quality improvement and linkage to follow-up care. We’ve seen meaningful improvements in cervical, lung and colorectal cancer screening and outcomes as a result — in the populations who need screening the most,” said Wheeler.

With colorectal cancer, screening barriers can be especially complex. Beyond the time and financial barriers that exist for other cancer screenings, colorectal cancer screening touches on aspects of the body that many people experience as private and sensitive, creating a layer of discomfort. Leah Frerichs, PhD, associate professor in health policy and management, leads efforts to make colorectal cancer screening more accessible, and to help communities understand their screening options. She partners with eight clinics throughout Robeson County on a digital platform that delivers text message reminders to patients who are due for a colorectal cancer screening. The text message alerts prompt patients to either schedule a colonoscopy or order an at-home stool testing kit, based on their preference.

Subtyping for precision treatment

Gillings School researchers are also working to ensure that once a patient receives a cancer

diagnosis, they have access to the most robust information possible about their tumor subtype and best treatment options. Naim Rashid, PhD, associate professor in biostatistics, worked with UNC Health collaborator Jen Jen Yeh, MD, to create a computational tool for subtyping and classifying pancreatic cancer tumors. It uses machine learning to analyze expression levels of 16 different genes and then classifies the patient’s tumor into one of two subtypes, which then informs which first-line chemotherapy treatment is likely to be most effective. This allows patients to receive precision treatment and spares them from wasting precious time on cancer treatments that will be ineffective.

Gillings researchers are also working to identify which cancers are indolent, or slow-moving and unlikely to be harmful, so that patients can avoid unnecessary treatments or overly aggressive treatment. Subtyping that can identify indolent cancers often takes place in specialized labs at large medical centers, but Melissa Troester, PhD, professor in epidemiology, is studying how cancer subtyping can be done with the pathology images that are already part of standard cancer care. Pathology images provide a detailed map of the tumor and its surroundings that can be used to identify indolent subtypes, providing vital information to inform treatment. And because these pathology images are collected for every patient who is diagnosed, using them for subtyping could expand precision treatment options to all cancer patients, even those in smaller, less-resourced health care systems.

It takes a team approach

Cancer care is complex, but patients should never feel like they’re navigating it alone.

“None of us can take on cancer alone,” said Rashid. “It takes researchers, statisticians, surgeons, biologists, pathologists, nurses, patient navigators, and the patients and families themselves, all working together as a team to take care of one another as we fight cancer.”



Dorothy Cilenti, DrPH, may be new to the role of associate dean for practice, but she's a two-time Carolina grad and a longtime advocate for the public health workforce in North Carolina.

Cilenti has led numerous public health agencies — including Chapel Hill's own Orange County Health Department — and currently leads the National Maternal and Child Health (MCH) Workforce Development Center in addition to her faculty roles in the Department of Maternal and Child Health and in the Department of Health Policy and Management. Now she's bringing that expertise and passion for building community relationships to her new leadership role.

The associate dean for practice oversees the implementation of the Gillings School's strategic plan for practice, which was developed in 2022 to elevate practice as equal with research and teaching in the School's mission. Cilenti will be building on the work of the previous associate dean for practice **John Wiesman, DrPH, MPH**. In this role, she will work with Practice Director Meghan Lassiter to focus on developing new partnerships with public health practitioners both inside and outside the Gillings School walls. She also wants to engage faculty who do practice-based work and to develop sustainable funding models that support community-engaged work, student practica and other practice-based efforts.

The School's academic health department model creates opportunities that benefit faculty, students and the workforce. Academic partners can provide needs assessments, program evaluation, workforce training and more to public health agencies that are often financially strained and understaffed, while practitioners can bring their real-world teaching, community context and experience to the classroom to train future public health leaders. The Gillings School Partnership Hubs across the state are just one example of this model. In addition, the School pursues a number of joint projects with public health agencies and organizations, including Nurture NC, the WIC Maternal Health Center and the Improving Community Outcomes for Maternal and Child Health initiative.

Cilenti aims to build on these successes and continue to elevate the importance of public health work in practice at Carolina.

"I feel fortunate to be in this role," Cilenti said. "I've had more than 35 years of work experience now at all different levels: nonprofit, state and local government, and the academic sector. And I'm continuing to expand my understanding of how all of these parts are important and work together." 🌐

DOROTHY CILENTI

LEADS THE GILLINGS SCHOOL VISION FOR PRACTICE



U'RONDA HIGGS

THE PIVOT

HELPS STUDENTS SUCCEED ON THEIR PATH THROUGH THE GILLINGS SCHOOL

WHAT'S YOUR ROLE IN PUBLIC HEALTH?

1

I'm an assistant director for academic advising at the UNC Gillings School of Global Public Health. In my role, I lead a dedicated team of advisors who support students throughout their academic journeys while fostering a culture of well-being and balance. I also work as an academic coordinator, which allows me to help undergraduate and graduate students navigate their time in Gillings.

One of the things that I'm very passionate about is wellness, because my background is in mental health counseling and disability services. So, I try to incorporate aspects of wellness support into all interactions with students. My role is to guide, advocate and affirm each student's place in their program, ensuring they know they belong here, and we're glad they're here.

CAN YOU DESCRIBE YOUR FOCUS AREA IN ONE SENTENCE?

2

I focus on nurturing future public health leaders by providing compassionate advising and promoting wellness practices that sustain both personal and professional growth.

When you're talking about wellness, that could be physical wellness, that could be mental health, that could be diet. My area of focus is a little bit of all those things. If a student comes to me, and I notice, for

example, a food insecurity issue or a financial issue, those are mental health issues as well. Students coming to me are all navigating personal challenges, all of which are connected to mental health and have the potential to deteriorate mental health if they fester. So, my goal is to connect students to resources that help them address their challenges at the forefront.

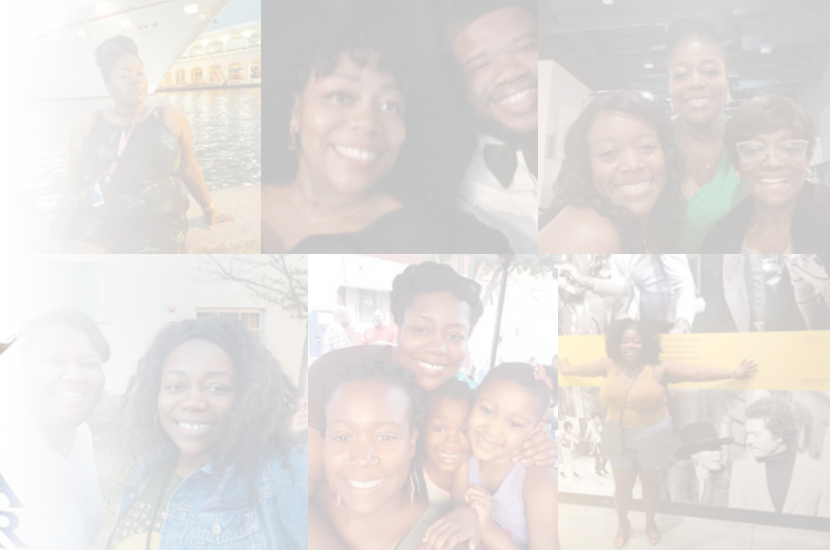
WHAT BROUGHT YOU TO PUBLIC HEALTH?

3

I was drawn to public health when I realized that supporting students goes beyond guiding educational paths or shaping careers; it's about nurturing whole, healthy individuals. I found my purpose in serving as the bridge between education, support and wellness.

I began my career working with K-12 students and transitioned into counseling within the non-profit sector. From there, I moved into the field of transitional educational services for students with disabilities. This role allowed me to advocate for clients and coordinate the support services they would need as they prepared to attend college in different regions. I worked closely with colleges to make sure each student had the necessary accommodations and resources in place.

When I came to North Carolina from New York, I worked at Barton College and then at the College of Agricultural and Life Sciences at N.C. State University. One day, a friend of mine, Johnston King, gave me a call and told me about an open position at Gillings. He told me it would be a place where I can do what I love in a way I need to do it. And he was right, exactly right. Coming to Gillings is honestly, literally one of the best decisions I've made in my career.



All of the things I've been doing professionally up to this point have equipped me to be here. I've been able to find the next version of myself, without abandoning what matters.

It's almost like the solution to a math problem!

WHO ARE YOU WHEN YOU'RE AT HOME?

5

I am a connector. I'm a problem solver. A lot of what you see here, within Gillings, reflects who I am outside of here, too. I am the go-to person for a lot of things, and I'm honored about that, because I come from a big family. To have individuals that I looked up to through the years, now contacting me for advice about things and helping them navigate situations, is an honor that I don't take lightly.

At home, I am Elizabeth's mom, a wife, daughter and trusted friend. I am the source of laughter and peace for many. I am a writer, storyteller and listener.

I live for the magic of live music, plays, laughter and meaningful moments with the people I love. Whether I'm exploring new places, dancing at a concert, or gathering with family and friends, I cherish every chance to make memories. Each day is about connecting, finding joy and honoring the stories that make us who we are. One of my greatest passions is preserving those memories, digging into my family's history and finding creative ways to document our journey. You realize that life isn't just about what you achieve but who you do it with and what you leave behind. 🗣️

I didn't understand public health until I got here. I didn't understand the intersectionality of everything that I'd been doing prior to working in a formal school of public health. I didn't know that public health was making sure that my students who had disabilities had access to certain levels of education or the ability to navigate a campus without different hurdles. I didn't understand that the advocacy part was also a form of public health. It wasn't until I got here that I was able to connect the dots while talking to students and faculty. It made me realize, "Wait a minute; I've been doing this all along."

CAN YOU DESCRIBE A TIME WHERE YOU HAVE PIVOTED IN YOUR PUBLIC HEALTH CAREER?

4

During my time at N.C. State, I realized students needed me for more than just academic planning and guidance. They needed someone to advocate for their well-being, too. That's when I leaned into wellness work and helped with initiatives that centered holistic student support. It was a pivot from traditional advising to being more intentional about care and creating safe spaces for students to be their full selves. I incorporate those same practices into my work here at Gillings.

RYAN CRONK

*Assistant Professor in the
Department of Environmental
Sciences and Engineering*

Ryan Cronk, PhD, research director at the Water Institute, focuses on documenting the impacts and sustainability of water, sanitation, hygiene and cleaning interventions on maternity wards and in global health care settings. His team evaluates the holistic benefits of these services for patients and health care workers, conducts impact evaluations to demonstrate their value, and uses implementation science to identify ways to improve service delivery and management.

While still an undergraduate student, Cronk worked on applied research projects in low- and middle-income countries. These formative experiences gave his engineering training purpose and application and confirmed that he wanted to spend his career at the intersection of public health and engineering. In 2015, Cronk led a World Health Organization (WHO) report on water, sanitation and hygiene in health care facilities that shed light on poor conditions worldwide for the first time and launched a new global effort, spearheaded by WHO, UNICEF and dozens of other partners, to improve health care environmental conditions.

Carolina has a strong athletics legacy, and the Gillings School takes pride in the success and health of the athletes who participate.

Raz Shaikh, PhD, and his team reflect that passion in their nutrition research. Shaikh is studying key molecules derived from dietary fats that are critical for controlling inflammation and supporting athletic performance. Inflammation develops during the course of physical activity or injury and is tightly regulated by certain dietary fat sources which are often depleted in athletes. Shaikh is applying a range of analytical methods to build a precision nutrition framework for resolving inflammation in female collegiate athletes and developing individualized nutrition recommendations to improve their recovery and performance.

For all athletes, performance is highly influenced by the intake of differing macro- and micro-nutrients. But female athletes have particularly unique nutritional requirements and can be prone to deficiencies in a wide range of nutrients. In the future, Shaikh's team aims to expand their approach to provide recommendations based on other physiological adaptations in athletes, like muscle protein synthesis and metabolic flexibility.

SAAME "RAZ" SHAIKH

*Professor and Chair of the
Department of Nutrition*

N.C. FIRST LADY ANNA STEIN ON CARE AND COMMUNITY

North Carolina First Lady Anna Stein, BA '92, JD '95, MPH '12 (health behavior and education), brings to her role a perspective shaped by public service and her grounding in public health. A proud alumna of the UNC Gillings School of Global Public Health, she carries forward the values she learned here — care, connection and a commitment to community well-being. As she travels the state, Stein focuses on the many ways North Carolinians look after one another.

OUR THEME THIS SPRING IS “TAKE CARE.” FROM GILLINGS TO YOUR ROLE NOW, WHAT PRACTICES OR VALUES HAVE REMAINED TOUCHSTONES FOR WELL-BEING AND SAFETY?

My core value is a belief in the humanity of all people. That has guided my priorities as First Lady, especially destigmatizing people with mental health or substance use disorders and people who are incarcerated or returning home. We are interconnected. We rise together or fall together, and public health is fundamentally about helping us rise together.

THE GILLINGS SCHOOL EMPHASIZES RESEARCH, EDUCATION AND PRACTICE TO IMPROVE HEALTH ACROSS ALL 100 COUNTIES. HOW DO YOU KEEP THE NEEDS OF THE ENTIRE STATE IN MIND?

Working in the Division of Public Health was perfect preparation for this role because we partnered closely

with local health departments. My mind naturally works at the county level. I still approach the state that way, listening locally, understanding context and using data alongside what I hear from people on the ground. That training from Gillings has stayed with me.

YOU’VE SEEN PUBLIC HEALTH AS A STUDENT, A PROFESSIONAL AND NOW AS FIRST LADY. HOW HAVE THOSE EXPERIENCES SHAPED YOUR UNDERSTANDING OF NORTH CAROLINIANS’ HEALTH AND RESILIENCE?

My work taught me how essential policy is to creating good health. Early in my career, I worked on tobacco prevention just after smoke-free restaurants and bars became law. The impact on people’s health was immediate. More recently, Medicaid expansion has been transformative for so many North Carolinians. Policy really does shape resilience. I’ve also seen resilience up close. After Hurricane Helene, I spent time in western North Carolina and witnessed how neighbors showed up for one another. The strength and generosity of people in this state is remarkable.



Photo credit Office of the First Lady: Anna Stein speaks with people incarcerated at Forsyth Correctional Center.

MANY OF OUR STUDENTS LOOK TO ALUMNI FOR GUIDANCE. WHAT ADVICE WOULD YOU OFFER ABOUT CARING FOR THEMSELVES WHILE PREPARING FOR CAREERS CENTERED ON CARING FOR OTHERS?

Take the pressure off yourself to have everything figured out! Careers unfold over decades, and most of us take detours along the way. I’m still pivoting to make an impact, and I hope to keep doing that for years to come. I want students to enjoy the present and trust that they have plenty of time to make the difference they’re hoping to make.

YOU MEET PEOPLE ACROSS THE STATE WHO WORK HARD TO KEEP THEIR FAMILIES AND COMMUNITIES HEALTHY. HOW DOES YOUR PUBLIC HEALTH BACKGROUND SHAPE THE WAY YOU LISTEN TO AND UPLIFT THEIR STORIES?

Public health taught me to seek out the voices of people with lived experience, not only those with inspirational stories but those who are currently struggling. When I visit a prison, I sit down with people who are incarcerated and listen to their experiences. That approach comes directly from my public health training. 🗣️

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

Bachelor of Public Health senior **Rotimi Kukoyi** is one of three UNC-Chapel Hill students chosen for the 2026 Rhodes scholars class. From Hoover, Alabama, Kukoyi is a Morehead-Cain scholar and Honors Carolina student majoring in health policy and management at Gillings with minors in chemistry and biology. He is senior class president, a Truman scholar and a “Jeopardy!” champion. Kukoyi has worked for the North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services and the Clinton Health Access Initiative in Nigeria. On campus, he has leadership roles with Campus Health and the UNC Student Health Action Coalition. At Oxford, Kukoyi will pursue the Master of Science in health improvement and evaluation and the Master of Science in evidence-based social intervention and policy evaluation.

Wenbo Wang, a doctoral student in biostatistics, was named a predoctoral semifinalist for the 2025 American Society of Human Genetics (ASHG) Trainee Research Excellence Award. The award recognizes outstanding research abstracts submitted and presented by predoctoral and postdoctoral trainees at the ASHG Annual Meeting. Out of more than 800 applicants, Wang’s abstract ranked among the top 60 submissions nationwide. Her award-winning work explores how combining polygenic risk scores with other omics-based models can enhance the prediction of complex traits and diseases.

Four Master of Public Health (MPH) students received the 2025 Impact in Practice Award, which recognizes students who made a significant, immediate and direct impact on public health practice during their summer 2025 practicum experience. This \$500 non-service award highlights efforts that exemplify the application of public health training and expertise to improve the health of communities, with a focus on capacity building, community engagement and health equity. The winners were **Jasmine Johnson**, MPH student in leadership in practice; **Leah Maness**, MPH student in applied epidemiology; **Grace Myers**, MPH student in health, equity and social justice; and **Caroline Van Buskirk**, MPH student in leadership in practice.

Doctoral student in epidemiology **Lucas Neuroth, MPH**, has been selected as the recipient of the 2025-2026 H. Clay Gabler Scholar’s Program Award, presented by the Association for the Advancement of Automotive Medicine (AAAM) at its 69th Annual Scientific Conference. The Gabler Scholars’ Program specifically seeks to support early-career investigators. This highly competitive award provides \$20,000 over 12 months to support a student researcher whose work aligns with AAAM’s mission of saving lives and eliminating road traffic injuries. Neuroth received the award

for his dissertation proposal on evaluating the New Jersey graduated drivers licensing (GDL) program to identify at-risk adolescents and communities where current GDL guidance may be insufficient. His goal is to better understand the incidence and burden of injuries in vulnerable populations.

Gillings biostatistics doctoral students **Anthony Wang** and **Annika Clevon** were awarded prestigious Graduate Research Fellowships from the National Science Foundation (NSF). The NSF Graduate Research Fellowship Program aims to strengthen the United States’ scientific and engineering workforce by supporting outstanding graduate students pursuing full-time research degrees in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM). The fellowship provides three years of financial support, including a stipend, tuition coverage and travel support to attend conferences and workshops.

A human lactation certificate program launched at North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University and led by Gillings doctoral student **Janiya Mitnaul Williams** has received a \$2.5 million grant from a global women’s health initiative supported by Melinda French Gates. Williams, a doctoral student in public health executive leadership, is director of the Pathway 2 Human Lactation Training Program. The grant from Action for Women’s Health will help the program expand its reach to serve even more pregnant and postpartum women.

Martina Spain, doctoral student in maternal and child health; **Liz McNeil Royea**, Master of Public Health student in health behavior; and **Catherine (Catie) Wiener**, doctoral student in epidemiology, received Graduate Teaching Assistant Awards.

Chuxin Chen, an undergraduate student in the Department of Biostatistics, received the Best Poster Award at the Statistics in Pharmaceuticals (SIP) 2025 conference. SIP introduces students and early-career professionals in statistics and data science to drug development and career pathways in the pharmaceutical and regulatory industries. Chen, who is also pursuing a second major in mathematics, was the only undergraduate presenting at the conference. Her poster, “FMA: A Fully Data-Driven Frequentist Model Averaging Approach for Analyzing Basket Trials,” introduces a new statistical method to support cancer research.

Seven of the eight UNC-Chapel Hill students selected for the 2025-2026 Rural Interprofessional Longitudinal Scholars (RIPLS) Program are enrolled at the Gillings School. Funded by the William R. Kenan, Jr. Charitable Trust, the program brings together health professions students from UNC-CH, UNC Pembroke and UNC Wilmington who desire to work in rural communities upon graduation. The Gillings students who received the scholarship are **Zoe Bestmann**

Smith, Adriana Gaona, Abdulhafiz Kedir, Rachel Moon, Parker Perry, Keaton Thorum and **Ima Varghese Mac**. The RIPLS Program fosters collaboration among future health care professionals as they work in teams to address the unique challenges of rural health care in N.C.

FACULTY/STAFF

Dorothy Cilenti, DrPH, clinical professor of maternal and child health (MCH), has been named associate dean for practice. Cilenti is a three-time UNC-Chapel Hill graduate: She earned a Master of Public Health degree in MCH, a Master of Social Work degree and a DrPH degree in health policy and management. She currently directs the National Maternal and Child Health Workforce Development Center, a cooperative agreement with the Health Resources Services Administration.

Jason Surratt, PhD, Cary C. Boshamer Distinguished Professor in the Department of Environmental Sciences and Engineering, and **Barbara Turpin, PhD**, professor and former chair of the Department of Environmental Sciences and Engineering, received one of *Environmental Science & Technology’s* Best Paper Awards for leading a study of pollution sources in sub-Saharan Africa that will help improve climate predictions. Their research shed new light on a particle called brown carbon, which absorbs sunlight and leads to a warming effect that can change weather patterns, intensify climate change and reduce visibility. Their findings will enable scientists and climate modelers to better estimate the warming effect of biomass burning by measuring brown carbon mass.

Seven Gillings faculty were named 2026-27 recipients of faculty development awards from the Office of the Provost:

- Four Gillings faculty members received the competitive Junior Faculty Development Award, which provides a \$10,000 stipend to support research or scholarly projects during the academic year. They are **Karl Johnson, PhD**, assistant professor of public health leadership and practice; **Lamis Jomaa, PhD**, teaching assistant professor of nutrition; **Anna Kahkoska, MD, PhD**, Joan Heckler Gillings Assistant Professor of nutrition; and **Didong Li, PhD**, assistant professor of biostatistics.
- **Baiming Zou, PhD**, associate professor of biostatistics, received a Fixed-Term Faculty Development Award, which provides up to \$25,000 to support research and scholarly endeavors.
- **Nora Rosenberg, PhD**, associate professor of health behavior, and **Delesha Carpenter, PhD**, adjunct professor of health behavior, received the Senior Faculty Research and Scholarly Leaves. Leaves can be taken during the fall semester, spring semester or academic year, along with a \$4,000 research fund and either a full base salary up to \$60,000 for one semester or one-half of the base salary up to \$60,000 for the full academic year.

Eight faculty members received the third annual Gillings Research Excellence Awards, which recognize one early- to mid-career faculty member from each department who has

demonstrated excellence, innovation and impact in their research pursuits. Awardees receive \$500 to support their research, scholarship and professional development. This year’s recipients are **Tanya Garcia, PhD**, associate professor of biostatistics; **Ryan Cronk, PhD**, assistant professor of environmental sciences and engineering; **Chantel Martin, PhD**, associate professor of epidemiology; **Lauren Hill, PhD**, associate professor of health behavior; **Arrianna Planey, PhD**, associate professor of health policy and management; **Meghan Shanahan, PhD**, associate professor of maternal and child health; **Jessica Soldavini, PhD**, assistant professor of nutrition; and **Minzhi Xing, MD**, assistant professor of public health leadership and practice.

Jess Edwards, PhD, associate professor of epidemiology; **Leah Frerichs, PhD**, associate professor of health policy and management; **Anna Kahkoska, MD, PhD**, assistant professor of nutrition; and **Musa Manga, PhD**, assistant professor of environmental sciences and engineering, have been awarded the inaugural Joan Heckler Gillings Endowed Professorships. The endowed three-year professorship, funded by the estate of the late Joan Heckler Gillings, will provide these faculty with crucial resources to conduct innovative pilot work, accelerate progress in their fields and support the students who collaborate with them.

UNC’s Rural Research, Engagement and Advancement Fund awards recognize university partnerships based in rural N.C., led by faculty members and community partners, that support a wide range of community endeavors. Gillings faculty who lead or co-lead these projects include: **Sheila Davies, PhD**, deputy county manager and Dare County Department of Health and Human Services director and adjunct faculty for the Gillings School’s MPH@UNC program; **Marie Lina Excellent, MD, MPH**, assistant professor and MPH Global Health concentration co-lead; and **Stephanie Martin, PhD, MEd**, associate professor of nutrition.

Barry Popkin, PhD, W.R. Kenan Jr. Distinguished Professor of nutrition at the UNC Gillings School of Global Public Health and founder of the Global Food Research Program at UNC-Chapel Hill, has coauthored a new series published in *The Lancet* warning that the rapid rise in ultra-processed food (UPF) consumption is undermining diet quality and health globally. The three-paper series brings together 43 international experts to examine the evidence and policy actions needed to curb UPFs.

Dana Rice, DrPH, assistant dean of academic affairs and associate professor of public health leadership and practice, has been appointed to the N.C. Gang Prevention and Intervention Task Force. The task force aims to reduce gang activity through education, prevention, law enforcement training and community coordination.

Jason Surratt, PhD, Cary C. Boshamer Distinguished Professor of environmental sciences and engineering, has received the American Association for Aerosol Research (AAAR)’s 2025 Teaching, Mentoring and Training Award at the 43rd Annual AAAR Conference. This prestigious award recognizes excellence in supporting students, postdocs, research scientists and early-career scientists while creating an inclusive environment.

Ilene Speizer, PhD, professor of maternal and child health, has co-edited a special issue of *Studies in Family Planning* titled “Rethinking Family Planning Measurement with a Rights, Justice, and Person-Centered Lens.” Speizer edited the issue with colleagues from the International Union for the Scientific Study of Populations (IUSSP) Panel.

Bethany Hedt-Gauthier, PhD, professor in the Department of Maternal and Child Health and the Department of Biostatistics, received the 2025 Lagakos Distinguished Alumni Award from the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health.

Eleven Gillings academics were named to Clarivate’s 2025 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:

- **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**, Cary C. Boshamer Distinguished Professor of epidemiology.
- **Rachel Graham, PhD**, assistant professor of epidemiology.
- **Lisa Gralinski, PhD**, assistant professor of epidemiology.
- **Sarah Leist, PhD**, research associate in epidemiology.
- **Evan Mayo-Wilson, DPhil**, associate professor of epidemiology.
- **Hans W. Paerl, PhD**, emeritus 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.
- **Alexandra Schaefer, PhD**, associate professor of epidemiology.
- **Timothy Sheahan, PhD**, assistant professor of epidemiology.

Four Gillings faculty members were named to the 2025 class of Thorp Faculty Engaged Scholars, a Carolina Center for Public Service initiative that supports and accelerates community-engaged research and teaching. The Thorp program brings faculty together in a two-year cohort to deepen their community connections, foster engaged scholarship and offer modest project funding to catalyze new partnerships and initiatives. Representing Gillings in this year’s cohort are **Shakia Hardy, PhD**, assistant professor of epidemiology; **Iheoma Iruka, PhD**, professor of maternal and child health; **Stephanie Martin, PhD**, associate professor of nutrition; and **Minzhi Xing, MD, MPH**, assistant professor of public health leadership and practice.

Lindsey Smith Taillie, PhD, professor of nutrition, has been selected to join the new Kairos program at UNC’s Eshelman Innovation Institute and will launch Lola, a personalized AI online grocery shopping technology that nudges users toward healthier and more sustainable food choices. The Kairos program will support Taillie through a six-month venture sprint, pairing her with two dedicated “venture builders” to validate the problem space, develop a compelling value proposition and pilot the platform in real markets. Her project, which also features the collaboration of the UNC Gillings Center for Artificial Intelligence and Public Health, highlights how AI and behavioral science can converge to shift food environments.

Lauren Eaves, PhD, assistant professor of environmental sciences and engineering at the Gillings School and research scientist at the UNC Institute for Environmental Health Solutions (IEHS), has been named to the de Beaumont Foundation’s 2025 list of 40 Under 40 in Public Health. She was recognized for her interdisciplinary research that integrates epidemiology, toxicogenomics and geospatial analysis to investigate how environmental chemical exposures, social vulnerabilities and climate stressors shape health outcomes —particularly in women and children.

Gillings Innovation Fellow **Nabarun “Nab” Dasgupta** has been awarded a 2025 MacArthur Fellowship, known as the “genius grant,” in recognition of his work as an epidemiologist and harm reduction advocate who combines scientific studies with community engagement to reduce deaths and other harms from drug use and overdose. Dasgupta and his team have played an important role in the national response to the opioid epidemic.

Two faculty members joined the Gillings School’s academic affairs leadership team: **Ciara Zachary, PhD**, assistant professor of health policy and management, has been appointed assistant dean for master’s programs, and **Shelley Golden, PhD**, associate professor of health behavior, has been named inaugural assistant dean for doctoral programs.

Christy Avery, PhD, professor of epidemiology, has been awarded a 2025-26 Fulbright-University of Leeds Distinguished Scholar Award. Part of an international exchange program between the United States and the United Kingdom, this prestigious award from the Fulbright Commission offers scholarships to postdoctoral, academic and professional researchers to study and/or lecture at recognized higher education institutions. Avery will study polymyalgia rheumatica (PMR) and giant cell arthritis (GCA), two debilitating inflammatory diseases with major unmet clinical needs. Her goal is to see if genetic data can help identify PMR and GCA patients who are at highest risk of glucocorticoid-induced cardiovascular disease, so they can be prioritized for alternative therapies that may be cardioprotective but are rarely used in the U.K. or U.S. due to their cost.

Vivian Go, PhD, professor of health behavior, and **William C. Miller, PhD**, professor of epidemiology, both members of UNC’s Institute for Global Health and Infectious Diseases, were named Honorable Professors by Hanoi Medical University in recognition of the outstanding contributions they have made in training, scientific research and development of international cooperation with Vietnam over the past decade. Go has worked in Vietnam since 2001, researching HIV

prevention, health behavior, mental health and substance use. She is a leading expert in clinical trials within this field and currently directs several projects in Vietnam. Miller, an expert on infectious diseases, started working in Vietnam in 2014 and actively participates in training young lecturers and researchers as well as supporting international publications.

Professor Emerita **Carol Runyan, PhD**, has been named president for the UNC Retired Faculty and Professionals Association (RFPA), which supports retired UNC-Chapel Hill faculty and staff by fostering continued engagement, learning and community service. Runyan is seeking to expand its visibility, improve member services and create more inclusive programming such as webinars and discussion groups.

Globally recognized water quality expert **Hans Paerl, PhD**, the William R. Kenan Professor of Marine and Environmental Sciences, retired in July, leaving behind a legacy that extends beyond his 50-page curriculum vitae and nearly 600 authored papers. The Paerl Lab in Morehead City has been one of the cornerstones of the Institute of Marine Science since Paerl joined in 1978. In his 47 years at IMS, Paerl conducted pivotal research on eutrophication and harmful algal blooms and trained countless future environmental scientists and leaders. He collaborated with environment managers and lawmakers to establish long-term water-monitoring programs and to limit the over-enrichment of waters from agricultural, urban and industrial runoff.

Hongtu Zhu, PhD, Kenan Distinguished Professor in the Department of Biostatistics, received the International Chinese Statistical Association (ICSA)’s 2025 Distinguished Achievement Award, which recognizes his outstanding contributions to the fields of statistical methodology and biomedical applications, especially in neuroimaging, big data integration and imaging genetics.

Marissa Hall, PhD, assistant professor of health behavior, has been named one of five recipients of UNC-Chapel Hill’s 2025 Phillip and Ruth Hettleman Prizes for Artistic and Scholarly Achievement, an \$8,000 prize awarded to early-career faculty members who exemplify groundbreaking and innovative research along with future career promise. Hall’s research focuses on how product labeling, marketing and availability shape consumer choices, especially around tobacco, alcohol and food.

Jeffrey S.A. Stringer, MD, adjunct professor of epidemiology at the Gillings School and the Clarke-Pearson Distinguished Professor of Obstetrics and Gynecology at the UNC School of Medicine, received the 2025 Oliver Max Gardner Award for his work on maternal healthcare in low-resource settings around the world. The highest faculty honor in the 17-campus UNC System, the award is presented annually to an individual “who has made the greatest contribution to the welfare of the human race.” As director of UNC’s global women’s health division, Stringer does research focused on preterm birth, HIV/AIDS in women and children, and obstetrical outcomes where resources are scarce.

A team of maternal-child health experts at UNC-Chapel Hill developed the Couplet Care Bassinet, the only postnatal bassinet that allows mothers to access their newborns without requiring a second adult to assist. In a National Institutes of

Health (NIH)-funded trial, use of the Couplet Care Bassinet led to a 73% reduction in maternal calls for nursing during inpatient postpartum and a 60% reduction in infant time spent out of the hospital room for non-medical reasons. The Couplet Care team includes **Stacie McEntyre, LCSW**, CEO of Couplet Care, and co-inventor **Kristin Tully, PhD**, at the Gillings School’s Carolina Global Breastfeeding Institute, a medical anthropologist and the company’s lead scientist and founder. UNC-Chapel Hill faculty co-inventors and clinical advisors are **Catherine Sullivan, MPH, RDN, LDN, IBCLC, RLC, FAND**, director of the Carolina Global Breastfeeding Institute and assistant professor at Gillings; **Carl Seashore, MD**, clinical advisor and professor of pediatrics; and **Alison Stuebe, MD**, distinguished scholar of infant and young child feeding at the Gillings School and professor of obstetrics and gynecology at the School of Medicine.

A recent article in *Nature* has highlighted the efforts of **Orlando Coronell, PhD**, professor of environmental sciences and engineering, and **Frank Leibfarth, PhD**, who are working on innovative solutions to address water contamination from PFAS, also known as “forever chemicals” because they are resistant to break down over time. They are designing a new technique that relies on sorbents and materials to capture and absorb PFAS molecules from the water supply. These sorbents are more effective than traditional water filters because they can target and trap even more difficult-to-remove types of PFAS. Early testing shows that this new method performs better than current PFAS removal techniques.

Xiangji Ying, PhD, assistant professor of epidemiology, was lead author of an article in *The BMJ* providing researchers with guidance and practical tools to help them better design pilot trials, a critical step in medical research pathway. Pilot trials are small test runs of medical trials, allowing researchers to understand how best to design a full trial that collects relevant data, recruits enough participants who will stay in the trial and promotes collaboration among the research team.

Gillings School faculty member and UNC Lineberger Comprehensive Cancer Center member **Naim Rashid, PhD**, is part of a group of laboratory and clinical investigators at UNC collaborating to speed the translation of lab discoveries into new treatments. UNC Lineberger has been awarded up to \$28 million by the Advanced Research Projects Agency for Health to lead the development of a next-generation clinical trial for breast cancer that has spread to other parts of the body. The new trial design will adapt treatment plans in near real-time by analyzing changes in each patient’s cancer and matching it to the most promising therapy.

A new report on breastfeeding from the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine (NASEM) draws on research by the Gillings School to inform its recommendations to encourage and support breastfeeding. Academies committee member **Alison Stuebe, MD**, professor of maternal and child health and Distinguished Scholar in Infant and Young Child Feeding at Gillings and professor of obstetrics and gynecology at the School of Medicine, helped draft the report, which also highlights research from the Carolina Global Breastfeeding Institute’s EMPower Breastfeeding and **Larelle Bookhart, PhD**, assistant professor of maternal and child health.

Three Gillings faculty members were among the 16 recipients of the 2025 University Distinguished Professorships, awarded to tenured full professors whose scholarly achievements, teaching excellence and service exemplify the University's highest standards. The Gillings School faculty receiving 2025 distinguished professorships are **Stephen Cole, PhD**, Cary C. Boshamer Distinguished Professor of epidemiology; **Jason Surratt, PhD**, Cary C. Boshamer Distinguished Professor of environmental sciences and engineering; and **Hongtu Zhu, PhD**, Kenan Distinguished Professor of biostatistics.

The student-nominated 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 2026 award winners are **Kara McCormack, PhD**, assistant professor of biostatistics; **Paul Zivich, PhD**, assistant professor of epidemiology; **Noah Kittner, PhD**, associate professor of environmental sciences and engineering; **Laura Villa Torres, PhD**, assistant professor of public health leadership and practice; **Kristin Z. Black, PhD**, assistant professor of maternal and child health; **Ximena Bustamante-Marin, PhD**, assistant professor of nutrition; and **Marissa G. Hall, PhD**, associate professor of health behavior.

Vivian Go, PhD, professor of health behavior, received one of the School's most prestigious awards, the Bernard G. Greenberg Alumni Endowment Award for teaching, research and service.

Kavita Singh Ongechi, PhD, professor of maternal and child health, 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.

Celeste Carberry, PhD, adjunct assistant professor of environmental sciences and engineering, was named the inaugural recipient of the student-nominated Adjunct Faculty Distinction in Teaching Award.

Ed Davis, PhD, professor emeritus and former chair of biostatistics at Gillings, and his wife Sherri recently established a fund for the Department of Biostatistics and the Collaborative Studies Coordinating Center (CSCC) in support of early-career CSCC faculty. According to Davis, assistant professors are often overwhelmed with the day-to-day tasks on CSCC studies and have little time for professional development. The Ed Davis Biostatistics Faculty Professional Development Award fund is intended to free up time for CSCC faculty to develop research and administrative skills that will allow them to be promoted to higher professor positions as their careers progress.

ALUMNI

DeVetta Holman-Copeland, PhD, MPH '85 (health behavior and education), has been inducted into the Order of the Long Leaf Pine, North Carolina's highest civilian honor, celebrating her commitment to improving health outcomes and nurturing the next generation of public health leaders in N.C.

Richard Zink, MS '99, PhD '03 (biostatistics), recently established a scholarship for Gillings graduate students to support their travel and engagement with the broader scientific community. Thanks to this scholarship, **Shuai Huang** and **Emmanuel Rockwell**, who are both seeking Doctor of Philosophy degrees in biostatistics, traveled to Nashville, Tennessee, to present their research at the 2025 Joint Statistical Meetings (JSM), the largest annual gathering of the American Statistical Association (ASA).

Adams Sibley, PhD, MPH, a recent doctoral graduate in health behavior, was named one of four 2025 recipients of the annual Dean's Distinguished Dissertation Awards. This award is given by The Graduate School at UNC-Chapel Hill to recognize doctoral candidates or recent doctoral graduates for creating exceptional dissertations in biological and life sciences; humanities and fine arts; mathematics, physical sciences and engineering; and social sciences. Sibley's dissertation is titled "Determining the Feasibility and Acceptability of a Novel Stigma Resistance Text Message Intervention for People who Use Drugs."

SCHOOL NEWS

The National Cancer Institute has awarded a five-year, \$11.2 million Cancer Health Disparities Specialized Program of Research Excellence (SPORE) in Endometrial Cancer grant to a UNC research group including several Gillings faculty members to support research to better understand and improve outcomes for endometrial cancer patients. The highly competitive SPORE grants provide substantial, long-term funding to support translational research and accelerate the development of new tools for cancer prevention, diagnosis and treatment. Gillings faculty involved in this work are **Hazel Nichols, PhD**, professor of epidemiology; **Ganga Bey, PhD, MPH**, assistant professor of epidemiology; **Rebecca Fry, PhD**, Carol Remmer Angle Distinguished Professor in Children's Environmental Health and professor and chair of environmental sciences and engineering; and **Stephanie Wheeler, PhD, MPH**, Michael S. O'Malley Distinguished Professor of health policy and management and associate director of Community Outreach and Engagement at UNC Lineberger Comprehensive Cancer Center.

The Gillings School has partnered with ADvancing States to launch the Foundational Leadership in Home and Community-Based Services (HCBS) program. This first-of-its-kind training module equips professionals with the knowledge and skills needed to support professionals working in the nation's long-term services and supports (LTSS) systems, with a focus on supporting people in their homes and communities.

Innovation@Gillings, which provides support and guidance to Gillings researchers seeking to translate research findings into sustainable public health solutions, has awarded four \$3,000 grants to faculty members seeking to test and hone their solutions. The grant recipients are **Amanda Northcross, PhD**, associate professor of environmental sciences and engineering; **Nora Rosenberg, PhD**, associate professor of health behavior; **Sean Sylvia, PhD**, associate professor of health policy and management; and **Karen Volmar, JD, MPH, FACHE**, associate professor of health policy and management.

The Department of Maternal and Child Health at the Gillings School was named one of 13 Centers of Excellence in Maternal and Child Health Education, Science, and Practice by the Maternal and Child Health Bureau (MCHB) of the Health Resource and Services Administration (HRSA). Led by **Meghan Shanahan, PhD** and **Kristin Z. Black, PhD, MPH**, the UNC Center will provide funding for six students each year. This designation will support training aimed at developing future public health leaders dedicated to improving the health of women, children and families. The center emphasizes collaboration with MCH communities and Title V partners to enhance training and impact.

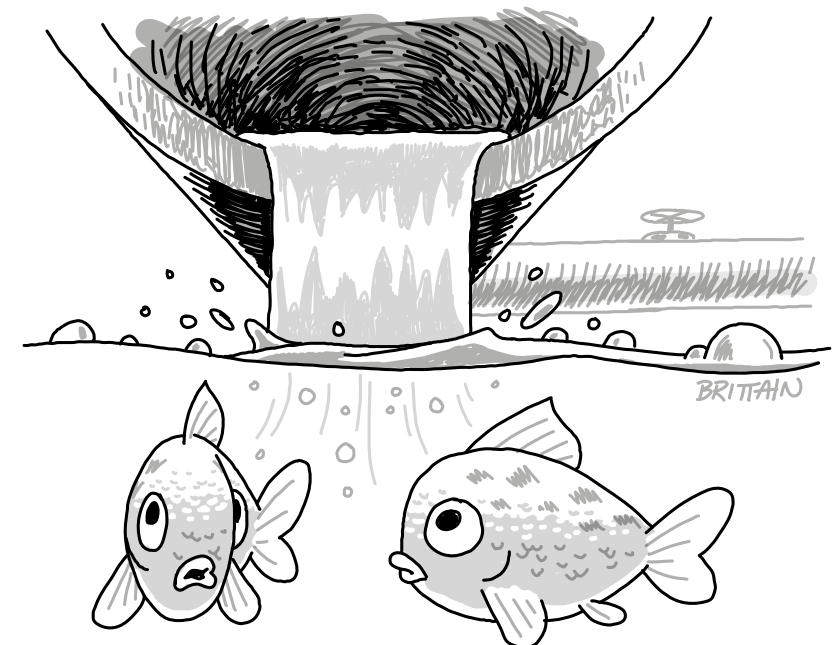
A \$60,000 Faith in Health Professions Campus Grant from Interfaith America will support the launch of a two-year Public Health and Faith Communities Initiative at the Gillings School, as the school joins a national cohort of campuses advancing innovative approaches at the intersection of faith, spirituality and public health. The award was granted to **Karl Johnson, PhD**, grant principal investigator and assistant professor of public health leadership and practice; **Makala D. Carrington, MPH, MDiv**, director of the Public Health and Faith Communities Initiative and adjunct instructor in public health leadership and practice; and **Kim Ramsey-White, PhD**, associate dean for well-being and associate professor of public health leadership and practice.

IN MEMORIAM

Arnold "Arnie" Kaluzny, PhD, emeritus professor of health policy and management and senior research fellow at the UNC Sheps Center for Health Services Research, passed away Oct. 29, 2025, at age 87. Kaluzny was a pioneer researcher in the field of health services, which examines the role and

impact of organizational structure and processes in health care systems and institutions. He was also an investigator at the UNC Lineberger Comprehensive Cancer Center and the Carolina Population Center and a longtime adviser to the National Cancer Institute. Kaluzny joined the then-School of Public Health at UNC in 1967 as a faculty member and became one of the first research associates at the Health Services Research Center, which later became the Sheps Center. He launched the doctoral program in health policy and management and focused much of his health services research into understanding how changes in health policy and services can improve access to care — particularly cancer care — and health outcomes. He co-authored or edited 10 books and more than 200 published works of scholarship, and his work and collaborations produced partnerships with health agencies around the world.

J. Michael (Mike) Bowling, PhD, former professor in Health Behavior and Biostatistics at Gillings, passed away peacefully Aug. 15, 2025, at age 71. He leaves behind a legacy of scholarship, teaching and service at UNC-Chapel Hill, where he helped advance research in tobacco control, injury prevention and health behavior. Bowling held leadership roles in key university initiatives and was passionate about teaching biostatistics. This earned him the McGavran Award for Excellence in Teaching in 2003. Known for his quirky humor and famous end-of-semester cheesecake, he helped his students overcome their fear of statistics. After retiring in 2016, he continued contributing to public health as Chair of the CDC Global Adult Tobacco Survey's Survey Review Committee. Colleagues praised his humility, brilliance and devotion to students, noting his lasting impact on generations of public health professionals. In retirement, he enjoyed traveling to Bordeaux with his wife Denise and spending time with his children and grandchildren. 🇺🇸



Caption this cartoon!
Send your suggestion to sphcomm@unc.edu



Ronald and Ann Wooten's lifelong connection to Carolina drives their support for innovative work that helps students build healthier, more fulfilling lives.

Wootens' philanthropy supports innovations in alcohol prevention and student well-being

When Ronald and Ann Wooten talk about Carolina, they do so with a deep, enduring stake in the University's future and the well-being of its students. Both graduates of UNC and parents of Tar Heels, they have remained closely connected to student life long after their own time on campus. Their philanthropy reflects that long-standing commitment and their belief that Carolina should be a place where young people can truly thrive.

Drawn to innovative work by the Department of Health Behavior at the UNC Gillings School of

Global Public Health on designing programs and policies to address substance use, the Wootens provided support for the faculty position of Melissa Cox, PhD. Cox's work focuses on reducing high-risk alcohol consumption among young adults, a significant issue on college campuses that, according to the NIH, has negative effects on as many as 1 in 4 college students.

"Ronald and I met at UNC. Our children are UNC graduates," said Ann Wooten. "It is so important

to us both to make sure young people at Carolina have options to socialize that don't involve drinking alcohol."

Cox's team recently completed a major trial of a phone-based mHealth intervention designed to help young people recognize and avoid problematic drinking patterns in real time. Early results showed high compliance and high satisfaction, giving the team strong evidence that they are on the right track.

"We keep getting really strong signals that this is needed and that it works," said Dr. Cox. "We're excited to take it to scale."

The team partnered with Innovate Carolina to run design-thinking workshops and rapid prototyping sessions with young adults who engage in high-risk drinking. These sessions helped refine features, test usability and shape an app that responds to students' needs. The app tailors messages to risk factors as they occur during a drinking event, providing real-time support to reduce alcohol consumption and mitigate harms. The app also supports goal-setting, helps students understand their own consumption patterns and provides direct access to resources and clinicians.

"It helped me track my habits and kind of take a step back and realize what I was doing," said one focus group participant. "Seeing visuals or even numbers to things was so helpful." The next step is building a full version of the app that can be installed on any modern smartphone.

The Wootens' most recent gift enabled a partnership with Newman Carpenter, a health communications firm founded by two 2020 health behavior Master of Public Health alums, Emily Newman and Kathryn Carpenter. Working with Dr. Cox, they developed campuswide print and digital campaigns aimed at shifting social norms around alcohol use.



Dr. Melissa Cox leads research on real-time, student-centered tools that help young adults recognize and reduce high-risk drinking.

Dr. Cox's work to reduce high-risk drinking among young people, especially on college campuses, has drawn significant external support from the NIH and Innovate Carolina. The Wootens' sustained investment has been a driving force shepherding her research from early concept through multiple stages of app development. Their vision and commitment have not only fueled the growth of this innovative tool but also helped position the work to attract strong outside funding. Thanks to their leadership, an ambitious idea is becoming a powerful resource for student well-being.

"I feel I've reached my potential, and that's a rare thing," said Ronald Wooten. "I want for every young person at Carolina to have that opportunity, and drinking gets in the way for too many." 🍷



Growing up in rural North Carolina, I always felt a sense of belonging to nature — a feeling that has now permeated my academic studies and professional goals. My overall goal is to pursue a research career in global environmental health. Receiving these awards means that I am able to focus less on the financial burden of attending graduate school and more on research that improves environmental public health, both locally and globally.”

— Lauren Sprouse, Doctor of Philosophy candidate in environmental sciences and engineering

When you give to the Public Health Foundation at the UNC Gillings School of Global Public Health, you open doors for emerging public health leaders. Their work, and their dreams, are fueled by donors like you. Hear directly from our annual fund scholars.



As an undergraduate, I volunteered at the Indiana Women’s Prison. I also developed a strong desire to improve health outcomes for low-income families during my time as a teacher in a Title I school during the COVID-19 pandemic. My career goal is to work in public health policy. This award has made a meaningful difference in my studies by allowing me to fully focus on the MPH program.”

— Emily Green, second-year Master of Public Health student in maternal and child health



“As a physician from a developing country, I noticed that typical medical training lacked emphasis on preventive care and did not equip physicians with the skills needed for management and leadership roles. I aspire to take on leadership and management roles in clinical care, ensuring that physicians have a voice in shaping health care systems and improving patient outcomes. [With this support] my perspective has expanded, and I now see myself becoming a global citizen.”

— Daisy Sowah, MD, graduating Master of Public Health student in public health leadership in practice



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KEHINDE TEMITAYO ENIOLA, MD, MPH '16
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