

Tar Heel Footprints in Health Care

A periodic feature that recognizes individuals whose efforts—often unsung—enhance the health of North Carolinians

Gayle Harris, MPH



Socioeconomic factors such as income, education, and community environment can have a profound impact on individuals' health. Gayle Harris, MPH, recognizes the importance of addressing these social determinants of health

and has worked hard as the director of the Durham County Health Department to mobilize the Durham community around health issues, even when they fall outside the traditional health system. Harris argues that, "We cannot blame poor health or credit good health because health outcomes are so often dictated by context. We need to deliberately look at improving the context in order to have a positive health impact."

A Durham native, Harris received a Bachelor of Science degree from Duke University School of Nursing and a Master of Public Health degree from the School of Public Health at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. She began her career at the Durham County Health Department in 1972 as a public health nurse, inspired by the patients she encountered as a nursing student. After 40 years at the Durham County Health Department, Harris says she feels blessed every day to have the opportunity to work with great people and give back to her community.

Kimberly Monroe, MPA, a program manager for the Duke University Health System Office of Community Relations and co-chair for Partnership for a Healthy Durham commends Harris' commitment to listening to the community and taking appropriate steps to address priorities. While conducting the most recent community health assessment, the Durham community identified important social issues including education, poverty, and

housing. Monroe says, "Gayle listens to the community and brings the issue of social determinants of health to the forefront in group discussions. She has succeeded in getting a high level of attention devoted to the issues and maintaining positive community momentum." This often includes educating community groups on the health impact of the work they do, underscoring the importance of socioeconomic factors, and framing the impact of community efforts on issues such as homelessness on health outcomes.

A number of strategic partnerships and coalitions have formed in Durham to better utilize existing local resources and skills to meet the needs and improve the health of the county's residents. Partnership for a Healthy Durham and Durham Health Innovations, the latter of which Gayle co-chairs, are 2 coalitions that strive to increase collaboration in order to create positive change in Durham, alongside less formal partnerships between local government agencies and community entities. Efforts to alleviate socioeconomic factors of poor health have included improving access to care and access to healthy foods, an expanded smoking ban, health impact assessment trainings, and the placement of public health nurses in schools.

Colleagues and community partners value Harris' expertise, community-oriented perspective, and leadership. David Reese, MBA, executive director of East Durham Children's Initiative and co-chair for Partnership for a Healthy Durham praised Harris' ability to engage the community,

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Anne M. Williams, North Carolina Institute of Medicine, 630 Davis Dr, Ste 100, Morrisville, NC 27560 (anne_williams@nciom.org).

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saying, "Gayle is an excellent leader and a visibly active participant in community efforts, continually demonstrating her commitment and sincerity. Her down-to-earth demeanor and collaborative leadership approach are valuable in increasing community engagement."

Lloyd Michener, MD, the Community and Family Medicine department chair at Duke University Health System also praises Harris as a fantastic partner in improving the health of Durham residents. Michener says, "She knows Durham and serves as an articulate spokesperson for the com-

munity. She is able to speak from a number of perspectives as a community member and advocate, nurse, and public health partner and consistently finds common ground and opportunity for collaboration in the community."

There is growing recognition in the field of public health of the importance of addressing social determinants of health in order to achieve positive health impacts. Under Harris's guidance, Durham County has become a leader in North Carolina in tackling social determinants as a community health priority. **NCMJ**