

Tar Heel Footprints in Health Care

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

Jo Morgan



Jo Morgan understands the importance of living in a community environment that enables and promotes, rather than hinders healthy lifestyle choices. As the health education director at the Pitt County Health Department, where she has worked the last 30 years, Morgan strives to make the healthy choice the easy choice for Pitt County Residents.

In 2010, Pitt County was one of two communities in North Carolina to receive Communities Putting Prevention to Work (CPPW) grant funds to focus their public health efforts on tackling obesity and tobacco use by enhancing the built environment and developing policies to make healthy living easier. The health department engaged numerous partners to tackle the complex work. Morgan says, "Pitt has a rich tradition of collaboration, it's become an expectation that they have of each other."

In addition to traditional health partners such as East Carolina University's Brody School of Medicine and Vidant Medical Center, Morgan enrolled non-traditional partners including local planners, representatives from chambers of commerce, cooperative extension agents, and law enforcement members. She facilitated new collaborative partnerships and educated partners and local decision makers on both the interconnections and health impact of their work. Though partners may have differing goals, Morgan often sees the intersection and brings community members together around common strategies.

Colleagues speak highly of Morgan's behind the scenes work on the grant and with the partners. James Rhodes, the Pitt County Planning and Development director says of Morgan, "She is passionate about her local community and excellent at using the available resources and experts to get the work done. CPPW is a great example of the long working relationships she has developed throughout her career." When possible, Morgan and other Pitt County Health Department staff look for opportunities to contract with other local

departments, utilize community experts, and expand existing efforts. John Morrow, MD, MPH, the Pitt County health director, says, "After a long career as a health educator, Jo has a very clear understanding of the role of the local health department as a catalyst to help create improvements in health status while building collaborative relationships among varied partners in a community. With CPPW, she has orchestrated the collaboration of many partners throughout Pitt County and has built lasting relationships between all of them that will continue to pay benefits to our public for years to come. In my opinion, Jo Morgan is the consummate health educator."

Through these collaborations, Pitt County has established a new community garden and farmer's markets, increased physical activity in after-school programs, and made healthy food more accessible in convenience stores. Cathy Thomas, MAEd, CHES, head of the Physical Activity and Nutrition Branch, Division of Public Health, North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services, praises Morgan's work saying, "The list is long of what Pitt County has done in the last 2 years in terms of healthy eating and active living. They have transformed the community, and if they don't watch out, we're all going to want to move there."

According to Morgan, there is still a long way to go and she is already looking ahead and reaching out to regional partners for the Community Transformation Grant (CTG) which uses Affordable Care Act funds to support community efforts to reduce chronic disease by promoting healthy lifestyles. But she says the buzz, desire, and excitement are there in Pitt County to move the work forward. And thanks to Morgan, the collaborations will be in place. **NCMJ**

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