

Philanthropy Profile

Convening Community Conversations That Matter

As Guilford County's only health-specific philanthropy, Cone Health Foundation supports organizations on the front lines of health care. In 2010–2011, approximately 79,000 (nearly 17%) of the nonelderly residents of Guilford County were uninsured [1]. These individuals and families have trouble accessing the health care system but are often those most in need of health care. Providing care for these individuals is a tremendous challenge for Guilford County, one that falls primarily on the shoulders of safety-net organizations.

Since Cone Health Foundation's founding in 1997, access to care has been its largest funding priority area. Many individuals in our community have only limited access to primary care and delay seeking treatment until they are seriously ill. Emergency departments are overwhelmed with patients who have no other options for medical care. In nearly all cases, these patients could be better treated in a primary care office.

At Cone Health Foundation, we know that changes in public policy can yield broad-scale, sustainable advances in population health. Relatively small advances in health advocacy can bring about systemic changes that address the social determinants of health and promote health equity, resulting in large improvements in the accessibility, quality, and efficiency of health care [2]. The foundation recognized that the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act of 2010 (ACA), though far from perfect, held the promise of providing affordable access to health care for many uninsured individuals in Guilford County. It could also improve coverage and relieve many families of the lingering burden of medical debt.

Research has shown that people know very little about the ACA and the health care options it will offer beginning in 2014 [3]. If Cone Health Foundation could define the problems with accessing high-quality health care so that people understood them, we could engage our community in an important conversation. Then we could inject research, scholarship, and analysis into the debate.

After carefully considering its goals, assets, and

grant-making portfolio, Cone Health Foundation committed to a nonpartisan public education effort. Our goal was to increase understanding both of the ACA and of the need for health reform. A central element of the strategy was to join forces with like-minded organizations to increase the impact of our efforts. Our partners included the League of Women Voters of the Piedmont Triad, Greensboro Public Library, and the public radio station WFDD.

"Decoding the Affordable Care Act" became the title for a series of community conversations and activities that took place over a period of 18 months. One set of events featured presentations by journalist T. R. Reid, author of *The New York Times* bestseller *The Healing of America: A Global Quest for Better, Cheaper, and Fairer Health Care*. In his book and as an on-air correspondent for 2 *Frontline* documentaries based on that book, Reid explained that other industrialized democracies provide health care for every citizen and spend only half as much as the United States does on care; then he went on to explain how they do it. A panel discussion following Reid's presentation was moderated by Denise Franklin, former general manager of WFDD. Participants included E. Benjamin Money, Jr., chief executive officer of the North Carolina Community Health Center Association; Mark Hall, the Fred D. and Elizabeth L. Turnage Professor of Law at Wake Forest University School of Law, who teaches health care law and policy there and at Wake Forest School of Medicine; and Marian Earls, MD, lead pediatric consultant at Community Care of North Carolina. This group brought a real-world lens to Reid's work and provided a North Carolina-specific perspective on the ACA. WFDD also aired a series of reports describing the challenges that many individuals face when trying to access health care.

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The League of Women Voters developed an ACA presentation that included slides, videos, and handouts. This presentation was delivered throughout the community; sessions were held with community groups, with lay health coaches, and with staff members of the Congregational Nurses and Pastoral Care programs at Cone Health.

Cone Health Foundation partnered with the League of Women Voters to host additional educational opportunities. One of these sessions featured Adam Linker, policy analyst at the North Carolina Justice Center's Health Access Coalition, who spoke on emerging issues, including how the health insurance marketplaces (also called health benefit exchanges) might be established in North Carolina. Also, leading health care policy scholar Mark Hall gave 2 talks about the arguments the US Supreme Court was considering. Hall led the team that wrote and filed a friend-of-the-court brief on behalf of more than 100 health law professors in support of the ACA's constitutionality.

Greensboro Public Library hosted "Health Care Facts and Fiction," a citywide literary event encouraging people to read and discuss Reid's *The Healing of America* and a novel by Lionel Shriver called *So Much for That*. The library's goal was to engage a wide spectrum of the community in a thoughtful exchange of ideas about this important issue. One well-attended book discussion was led by R. Timothy Rice, chief executive officer of Cone Health, and Allen Johnson, editorial page editor of the *Greensboro News and Record*. Greensboro Public Library also hosted a health care film festival to help frame this important conversation. Films shown included *John Q*, *Money-Driven Medicine*, and *Obama's Deal* (another *Frontline* documentary).

Cone Health Foundation supported the League of Women Voters' efforts to host a prerelease showing of the movie *Escape Fire: The Fight to Rescue American Healthcare*. The film, which premiered at the Sundance Film Festival in January 2012, examines the powerful forces trying to maintain the current medical industry and efforts to fix it.

In May 2012, Cone Health Foundation released its seventh white paper, titled *Health Care Access in Guilford County* [4]. The paper, written by a group of scholars at North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University and Wake Forest School of Medicine, provides a road map for the foundation's access-to-care funding strategy for the future.

In April 2013, the foundation hosted health care policy expert Len M. Nichols, director of the Center for Health Policy Research and Ethics and professor of health policy at George Mason University. Nichols, known for his unbiased analysis of health reform, participated in 3 community conversations framing the current health care debate in historical terms and examining the issue of Medicaid expansion.

Have We Made a Difference?

Cone Health Foundation's ultimate vision is for every person in Guilford County to have a primary health care home. Although we cannot achieve that vision overnight, we must focus on the here-and-now activities that move us toward that goal. Advocacy plays a crucial role in this process.

Through this campaign, we learned that it is possible to have civil conversations about highly contentious issues. We hosted well-attended events; generated television coverage, editorials, and letters to the editor; inspired community conversations; and made a smart, strategic investment in our future. For Cone Health Foundation, this is an investment that makes sense. NCMJ

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Acknowledgment

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