

SPRING 2017

The Story of North Carolina Counties
County QUARTERLY
MAGAZINE

NCACC OFFICES IMPACTED by FIVE-ALARM FIRE

A Photo Documentary of the Raleigh Fire
and the Firefighters that Risked it All | pg 22



the Jigsaw of Addiction

A Look Into the Puzzle Pieces of North Carolina's Opioid Crisis

By Lacy Pate | NCACC Public Relations Manager

Counties, which serve the public at the level closest to the people, play a very important role in shaping healthy lifestyles for communities throughout North Carolina. Counties help residents access Medicaid programs, nutrition assistance and other resources that contribute to healthy living. So, it's fitting that NCACC President Fred McClure established his presidential initiative around a key health issue affecting counties across the state - the growing opioid health crisis.

Opioid addiction in North Carolina has reached epidemic proportions, causing a spike in overdose related deaths and bringing tragedy to so many families. To combat this complex and widespread problem, NCACC has sought a partnership with the North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services and found common cause with its new Secretary, Dr. Mandy Cohen.

Combatting the opioid crisis is one of Secretary Cohen's top priorities and she shared some of the efforts being undertaken by the state to address this and other health issues. As a doctor by training and former federal official with experience managing complex health organizations, she is uniquely qualified to help reverse the troubling statistics of opioid abuse in North Carolina. The following article is the first of a two-part series on North Carolina's fight against opioid addiction.

The Profile of a Key Player in the Fight Against Opioids: Dr. Mandy Cohen, Secretary, NC Department of Health and Human Services

Mandy K. Cohen, MD, MPH joined as Secretary of the NC Department of Health and Human Services on January 13, 2017. She accepted Governor Cooper's appointment to this position, which she described as a perfect fit at the perfect time. She recently relocated to North Carolina from Washington, D.C. with her husband and two daughters and has enjoyed a smooth transition and welcoming atmosphere. Secretary Cohen brings an impressive resume, unique skill set, and patient-centric perspective to the fight against opioids and other health care challenges for the state. As both a

medical professional and policy expert, she serves as a critical link between the worlds of medicine and government.

Dr. Cohen's Cross-Training Regimen in Practice and Policy

Dr. Cohen was born and raised in Baldwin, which is located in the town of Hempstead in Nassau County, New York. She attended school there from elementary to high school and her parents still reside in the community, which has just under 25,000 residents. After graduating from Cornell



University, she worked on Capitol Hill in Washington, D.C. She recalls thinking that there weren't many doctors around and took note of the fact that those working on health policy typically didn't have a medical background.

Dr. Cohen went on to receive her medical degree from Yale University, and trained in Internal Medicine at the Massachusetts General Hospital in Boston, MA. She interacted with professionals who had experience working in Washington, D.C. or running complex hospital systems. These individuals served as role models, showing her that the ability to practice medicine and shape health policy was within reach. And, she cemented that path by earning a Master's degree in Public Health from Harvard University.

Dr. Cohen's first job after residency was serving as the Deputy Director of Comprehensive Women's Health Services at the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs. As her first area of practice, she said it "very much informs how I think about a lot of the work I want to do here in North Carolina, particularly around behavioral health."

Her role at the VA was to improve the delivery of care for women veterans. The high incidence of anxiety, depression, PTSD, and other mental health challenges affected her female

veteran patients. To address these issues, the VA made significant investments in integrating primary and behavioral health care together. As part of the VA's integrated health model, Dr. Cohen worked very closely with behavioral health experts. She described how this partnership helped her as a doctor, provided better care for her patients, and helped her understand the intersection of policy and practice.

"Because I was working four doors down from folks who worked in behavioral health, a psychiatrist, or psychologist or a social worker, I was able to better learn as a young doctor how to help my patients..."

"And, if a patient came in crisis I literally could just walk them down and we had an ability to get them in same day to intervene on any sort of a mental health issue that they might be having... So, that was my foundation. It was an integrated delivery system."

The Leadership and Drive behind the Discovery of Best Practices

Prior to her appointment as Secretary, Dr. Cohen also worked at a patient advocacy organization and held various positions at the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and the

“This is where the counties are such critical partners in the delivery of services, particularly for children, and frankly across the social services spectrum.”

Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services. Among other things, she oversaw the Health Insurance Marketplace and private insurance market regulation, worked with external partners on implementation of the Affordable Care Act, and collaborated with stakeholders to identify and test new payment and care delivery models. Most recently, she served as the Chief Operating Officer and Chief of Staff for the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services, where she provided operational leadership and coordination across the Agency.

Dr. Cohen’s government service has largely been focused on addressing inefficiencies and waste in our health care system and finding new payment models that result in better health outcomes. Over the next couple of years, Dr. Cohen hopes to accomplish a lot and her experience in these areas, along with her background in organizational leadership, are valuable tools as North Carolina fights the deadly opioid epidemic and undergoes a complex transition to a managed care model for Medicaid. In addition to addressing these challenges, Dr. Cohen is focused on improving the delivery of health care and other services for children. It’s an issue near and dear to her heart and she values the role of counties.

“This is where the counties are such critical partners in the delivery of services, particularly for children, and frankly across the social services spectrum. We really need and value their partnership on our focus on children because the counties are doing everything from establishing eligibility for any one of our programs – giving out child care subsidies, NC Pre-K slots, and Smart

Start, and handling the public health departments in their counties, which do newborn screenings and some of the early interventions for kids that have developmental delay – so it’s a ton of work going on at the county, and that doesn’t even touch the at-risk kids who are in the child protective services space or foster care system. I mean that is just a ton of work at the county level.”

Complex, Interconnected Problems Need Synergy and All Hands on Deck

Since becoming Secretary, Dr. Cohen has presided over several listening sessions around the state to collect public comments from North Carolinians on the state’s Medicaid reform plan. The NC Department of Health and Human Services is in the process of summarizing public input and NCACC will provide additional information once the summary is released. In the meantime, Dr. Cohen shared her insight on Medicaid reform and the transition from fee for service to a managed care model. Referring back to her experience at the VA, where she saw firsthand how patients can benefit from integrated care, Dr. Cohen described her vision for whole person, integrated care for patients.

“Their diabetes does not sit on one side and their emotions sit on another... they are all in one body and it’s all interconnected. As you treat one, you’re treating other things and so how do we create delivery systems that allow for the thinking about a whole person. So for me, thinking about the levers we have... that means changing the way we pay for things. So what we’ve been taking

comment on is thinking about how to merge back the physical and behavioral health side.”

Regarding opioids, Dr. Cohen sent a letter to every prescriber in North Carolina urging them to follow CDC guidelines for opioid prescribing and to use the controlled substances reporting database, as well as e-prescribing, which sends prescriptions directly to the pharmacy, thus preventing paper scripts from being altered. She is also working internally with the Department and other stakeholders on an action plan to define specific goals on opioids and metrics to ensure accountability in achieving them.

“We sent a letter to doctors to start that conversation and what we’ve been working on internally is putting together a coordinated action plan on opioids and we want it to span much more than the work of the department because it’s a complex issue...we got here because of complex factors and so it’s going to need way more than just this Department working on it.”

According to DHHS’s epidemiologic data, prescription opioid poisoning deaths increased by 256% between 2000 and 2015 and deaths from heroin overdoses increased by 800 percent during that same period. Dr. Cohen explained that a major factor for North Carolina is the rate of uninsured and those who are under-insured. The recent announcement of a \$31 million federal grant over two years to help with opioid treatment is welcome news, but Dr. Cohen emphasized that the uninsured rate is “a real, real challenge for us here in North Carolina.”

Dr. Cohen expressed a strong desire to partner with counties and ensure that the Association and its members are connected to next steps. The state’s opioid action plan will be rolled out at a summit on June 27 and will be the subject of further reporting in the next issue of *CountyQuarterly*. For more information on the summit, go to www.opioidpreventionsummit.org. ■



Secretary Cohen met with NCACC Executive Officers, pictured left to right, Past President Glen Webb (Pitt County), President Fred McClure (Davidson County) and President Elect Brenda Howerton (Durham County).



Delivery of Social Services in NC

NC DHHS Secretary Cohen Shares Thoughts on the State-County Partnership

NCACC had the opportunity to speak with Dr. Mandy Cohen, the Secretary of the North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) about the relationship between counties and the state, particularly as it relates to the delivery of social services. Secretary Cohen is eager to build stronger partnerships with counties and noted the appointment of Durham County's former Department of Social Services Director, Michael A. Becketts to the position of Assistant Secretary for Human Services at DHHS, as a positive step toward that goal.

I see it as one team because we are partners in this. So anytime you're in one team it takes communication, it takes trust, it takes transparency. And by transparency, if you're having an issue you need to raise your hand and say I need help, or I need something. Or, at the same time, where I'm doing something really well...let me share this with other counties. And we have to be better at the state level of not just saying, hey, this might a good way, why don't you think about it. If enough counties have said [it works], we've tested it in enough places, rural and urban - to make sure we're accounting for different types of factors - but if something is working, why aren't we all doing it?

I think there is a way without being overly prescriptive to get folks on the same page of best practices a bit more than we have been. But it goes back to communication and that transparency. If the counties are saying, hey that's not going to work for us and here's why...great, then we understand it, and we can work with someone, we can adapt it. And that partnership is so critical, and the communication is so critical. But I think you also have to approach it from a place where we all trust each other. That we all have the best intent for kids or the families in the county.

Secretary Cohen met with NCACC Executive Officers to discuss her areas of focus, and how counties can partner with the state on particular efforts.

Secretary Cohen also emphasized the importance of effective and functional information technology systems, as well as good data to enable counties to make well informed decisions, particularly for the most sensitive cases like where to place a vulnerable child.

I applaud counties for the work they are doing in this space, but I do think there are ways that we can do this better. And, there may be things that make sense to lean on each other as counties...where if you consolidate a functionality, you can still have a local presence. You don't compromise access to services, but you do get some efficiencies on things. But that takes really good communication, it takes data, it takes transparency, it takes accountability. But it's a process that we need to work through together and as long as we keep the intent in mind, which is protecting children and families, we will land in a good place.

What I am hopeful for as we move through our work is that we can both increase the capacity to protect our kids both at the state and at the county level. And so that's what we've been focused on. And in order to do that we need good data, and that very much rests with the state and we haven't always lived up to our end of the bargain on our IT systems that are meant to support the county work. And so, I brought in some new leadership to help us focus on our IT work in particular and think about how we can best support the counties to do their hard work.

We need good data to know how we're doing and to best do our work, particularly when you think about child protective services and how data helps inform any one individual case and how to make decisions about should a child stay in a home or should we take a child out of a home – a heart wrenching decision. That is a hard decision to make and you want to make sure that they have good data that informs that decision making.

But then also to make sure we have data that can travel across county lines because people travel across county lines. And we want to make sure that data follows a person no matter where they are. And that's a lot of work on our side.

And then we need to hold ourselves accountable to standards. We need to know what are the appropriate metrics and standards and then hold ourselves accountable. And, if you're not meeting them, you need to raise your hand and say I need help here...and how do we help counties particularly the ones that have less resources? These are hard tasks to take on and a lot of responsibility so how do we at the state do our best to support them?

“I see it as one team because we are partners in this. So anytime you're in one team it takes communication, it takes trust, it takes transparency.”



CountyQuarterly is distributed Spring, Summer, Fall and Winter to county commissioners, managers and clerks, legislators and public libraries, as well as others interested in the county story. The magazine seeks to bring the county story to life with a focus on the leaders that make county government tick, innovative programs that improve services to citizens, and county history.

For information on subscribing
and advertising, go to
www.ncacc.org/countyquarterly

Executive Director
Kevin Leonard

**Managing Editor &
Chief Communications Officer**
Sara Mogilski

**Photographer &
Digital Media Director**
Chris Baucom

**Writer, Editor &
Public Relations Manager**
Lacy Pate

**Creative Input & Creative
Communications Coordinator**
Ben Christoph

Contributing Writers this Issue:

Amy Bason, J.D.,
General Counsel & Deputy Director

Linda Millsaps, Ph.D.,
Research Director

Todd McGee,
Orange County Comm. Relations Dir.

Leslie Mozingo,
Strategics Consulting

Graphic Design by:
IngridBeckman.com

Send address changes and other updates
to communications@ncacc.org

**North Carolina Association
of County Commissioners**

353 East Six Forks Road
Raleigh, NC 27609
(919) 715-2893
www.ncacc.org



CountyQUARTERLY

The Story of North Carolina Counties
MAGAZINE

353 East Six Forks Road, Suite 300
Raleigh, NC 27609

NCACC Associate Members - Thanks for Your Support!



www.bobbitt.com

www.cecvision.com

www.cshlaw.com

www.econnectdirect.com

www.farragut.com/localgov



www.lgfcu.org

www.mbkahn.com

www.mcgillengineers.com

www.moseleyarchitects.com

www.nrsforu.com



www.psnenergy.com

www.republicservices.com

www.rbauction.com

www.tankcare.net

www.springsted.com

The NCACC's Associate Membership Program is designed to foster a positive relationship between North Carolina's 100 counties and the organizations that offer services needed in today's complex county governmental system. Visit www.ncacc.org/associatemembership to learn about the benefits of joining.