



## 2017 State of the County Health Report





## About this report

The Alexander County Health Department (ACHD) is pleased to present the 2017 State of the County Health (SOTCH) Report. As part of North Carolina's local health department accreditation process and consolidated contract, the Alexander County Health Department is required to submit a comprehensive Community Health Assessment (CHA) every four years. During the years between health assessments, a State of the County Health Report is issued. The SOTCH Report is an abbreviated version of the larger health assessment and is intended to provide a quick overview of the health of Alexander County.

The CHA is a community-driven report that reflects health concerns affecting the longevity and quality of life for Alexander County's residents. It also identifies overarching themes in the local data. Community health priorities emerge from this report, and the Alexander County Health Department works to improve the overall health of county residents by addressing these health priorities. These areas include substance abuse, mental health, and healthy families.

The SOTCH serves as a way to ensure that progress is being made toward addressing these priorities, identifies emerging issues and discusses new initiatives. This report includes updated information on health priorities that were identified in the 2014 Community Health Assessment and builds on progress made in the 2015 and 2016 SOTCH reports.

Because socioeconomic factors often affect our health, demographic and other baseline information precedes the health data. It is used to provide background information and context on the county and its residents.

The information contained in this SOTCH report is designed to educate and update community members, community leaders, agencies, organizations, and others on the progress in addressing certain health issues. This update is also intended to influence the development of new policies that affect the health of the community, guide the planning of health programs and recruit interested community members to participate in future activities.

This report, along with previous SOTCH and CHA reports, is made available to the public on our website:

[www.alexanderhealth.org](http://www.alexanderhealth.org).

Sincerely,

Leeanne Whisnant, MS, BSN, RN

*Leeanne Whisnant*

Health Director, Alexander County Health Department

### 2014 CHA HEALTH PRIORITIES

1. HEALTHY FAMILIES
2. MENTAL HEALTH
3. SUBSTANCE ABUSE



The Hiddenite Festival Road Race, one of several road races held in Alexander County, offers residents and visitors the opportunity to compete in runs of 5K, 10K, or half marathon distances.

# Overview of Alexander County

## Community Overview

Located in the foothills region of western North Carolina, Alexander County is comprised of 263 square miles. Two-thirds of the county is farmland, with an average farm size of 90 acres, and producing commodities such as poultry, dairy, tobacco, apples, forestry products, grain crops, and beef cattle. Other primary industries include furniture, textiles, education, health services, professional, business services, trade, transportation, and utilities.

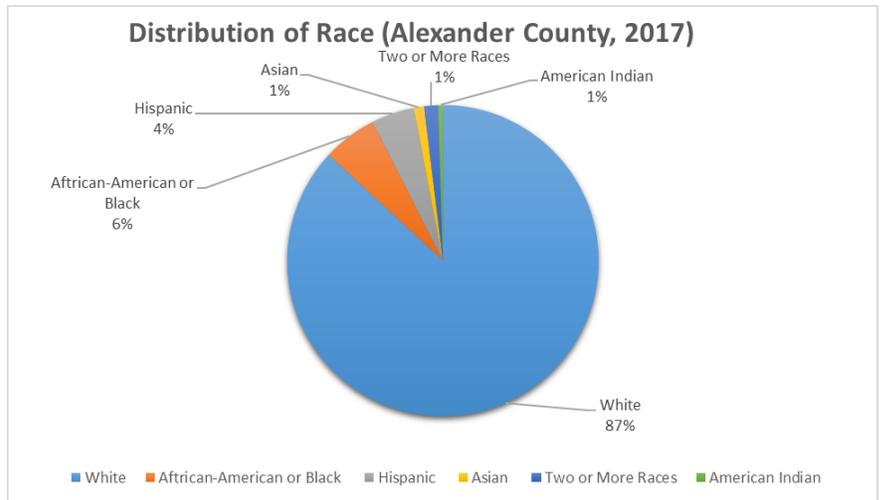
Alexander County offers a variety of outdoor attractions for citizens and visitors to enjoy, whether it is hiking or rock climbing at Rocky Face Mountain Recreational Area, gem mining, swimming, and running in one of the county's numerous road race events, boating or fishing on Lake Hickory, or riding your ATV at one of the county's all-terrain parks. Alexander County strives to offer its citizens and visitors with numerous opportunities to remain active and fit.



## Population

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, the total estimated population for Alexander County in 2017 was 37,428, which is a slight increase from the recorded population of 37,193 in the 2010 Census. Alexander County is a predominantly white community with a median age of 42.1 and a median household income of \$39,365.

Data Source: U.S. Census Bureau



## Educational Obtainment

U.S. Census Bureau estimates show that in Alexander County, 80.6% of the population has obtained a high school diploma or equivalent, and 13.3% hold a bachelor's degree or higher. Both figures are lower than the state average of 86.3%, and 29% respectively. The high school dropout rate is higher than the state average at 19% compared to 14%.

## Poverty

In 2017, 15% of people in Alexander County reported incomes below the United States poverty level. North Carolina’s poverty level is nearly the same at 15.4%.

## Unemployment

The unemployment rate that was reported in the 2014 Alexander County CHA was 7.6%; as of December 2017, this has fallen to 3.7%.

## Access to Care

Alexander County is a medically underserved community. There exists a severe shortage of medical care providers in all medical areas. The ratio of health care providers to citizens in Alexander County compared to the state average is listed to the right. (UNC Sheps Center for healthcare provider statistics)

2015-2016 Health Professionals per 10,000 Population		
	Alexander County	North Carolina
Primary Care Physicians	2.6	7.0
Physician Assistants	1.5	5.5
Nurse Practitioners	1.8	6.1
Dentists	1.3	4.9
Pharmacists	4.9	11
Registered Nurses	35	100
Psychologists	.26	2.2
Optometrists	.26	1.1
Physical Therapy	1.0	6.0
Podiatrists	0	0.29
Occupational Therapists	1.3	3.1

## Leading Causes of Death

In the most recent data from N.C. Center for Health Statistics, cancer once again was the leading cause of death in Alexander County. Diseases of the heart closely followed cancer. Chronic lower respiratory diseases ranked as the third most prevalent cause of death in 2016. These diseases and illnesses also made up the top three causes of death in 2014 and 2015, with all three slightly increasing in frequency from the previous year.

High blood pressure, obesity/overweight, poor nutrition, limited physical activity, high cholesterol, tobacco use and substance abuse are the most prevalent risk factors that can increase the chance of developing a chronic disease. Diabetes death rates have also shown an increase over the past decade.

The chart (right) shows the leading causes of death in Alexander County for 2016. *Data for 2017 will not be available until fall 2018.* Cancer became the leading cause of death in 2011 and has retained the top ranking continually since then. The Alexander County Health Department and community partners continue to work to address this issue. Noted in the 2014 CHA, the deaths associated with Alzheimer’s disease has shown an upward trend since 2010. However, Alzheimer’s disease saw a significant spike in 2015 before dropping again in 2016.

2016 Causes of Death	
1	Cancer
2	Diseases of the heart
3	Chronic lower respiratory diseases
4	Alzheimer's disease
5	Cerebrovascular disease
6	Diabetes mellitus
7	All other unintentional injuries
8	Suicide
9	Influenza and pneumonia
10	Nephritis

Source: N.C. State Center for Health Statistics

# Progress toward Priorities

## Healthy Families

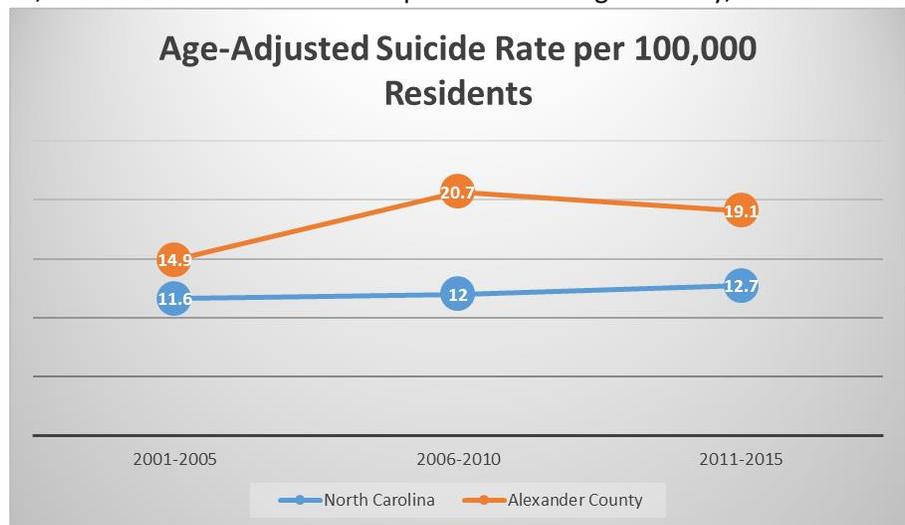
In 2017, the Alexander County Health Department has been able through new funding to hire a health educator. Our health educator will be promoting health and wellness through classes in our school system, employment health fairs, and collaborating with local agencies. Alexander County has established a new, certified Safe Kids Coalition. Our health educator is a member of the coalition. The Safe Kids Coalition focuses on reducing child mortalities and injuries by educating families and the community on safety tips such as fire safety or poisoning prevention. The local daycares have received a Farm to Table Grant and are promoting healthy eating habits to children. The county has also merged community resources at the former First United Methodist Church. The church houses Shelter Home of Caldwell County-Alexander Branch, Communities in Schools, United Way-Alexander County, and a new soup kitchen, 957 Café, which offers healthy meals to the displaced residents in our community. Rocky Face Recreational Area opened in 2012 and since then the park has offered new courses and activities, including hiking, rock climbing, primitive backpacking, and geocaching. The Vertical Mile Challenge is very popular among residents of Alexander County. The course is approximately a 2-mile loop with a 500-foot climb up the face of the mountain. Over a thousand people have completed the Vertical Mile Challenge where participants must complete 8 loops of the 2.2-mile trail, a total 17.6 miles or 1 vertical mile.



- The Health Department will continue to work with the local Nutrition Coalition and Physical Activity Committee to promote participation in these programs to enhance the eating habits of our young residents.
- The Alexander County Health Department also has continued its partnership with the Alexander County Cooperative Extension, the Alexander County Partnership for Children, and N.C. A&T State University to present Speedway to Healthy to preschool and elementary students in 2017. Speedway to Healthy is a walk-through exhibit representing the human body and serves to combat childhood obesity and poor health among children in Alexander County. Our Health Educator participated in explaining to third-graders from all elementary schools the benefits of healthy eating.
- The Alexander County Farmer's Market continues to thrive in its location at the old Alexander County Hospital site on Highway 16 South in Taylorsville. The market is a partnership between the Alexander County Health Department and the Alexander County Cooperative Extension and increases access to healthy fruits and vegetables.

## Mental Health

Mental Health continues to be a complex and difficult issue to address in Alexander County. In October 2016, Smoky Mountain LME/MCO became Vaya Health. Vaya Health serves 23 counties in North Carolina, including Alexander. The Alexander County Health Department in collaboration with Vaya Health is working to combat the issues with mental health. ACHD has a kiosk located in our lobby provided by Vaya Health that our patients can use freely. The kiosk allows users to take an anonymous patient health questionnaire and it will let them know if they have symptoms relatable to a number of mental illnesses. If the user presents with symptoms of mental illness, then the kiosk also has a phone attached allowing the patient to call and set up a counseling appointment if needed. The kiosk sends monthly reports of the number of times it was used and the outcomes. In December, the Health Department again collaborated with Vaya Health to offer Mental Health First Aid Training. This course teaches participants the skills needed to respond and assist anyone who is exhibiting signs of mental illness and substance use. The class allows 30 participants and 27 people from various backgrounds including law enforcement, DSS, the general public, and others to attend and complete the training. Recently, the new Health Educator has applied for two grant opportunities, the Duke Endowment and The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation-Pioneering Ideas. The grant will help fund behavioral health services that the health department wants to provide. The most recent data suggest a decrease in Alexander County's suicide rate. Although these statistics seem optimistic, the Health Department feels that this is not a true representation of current data and will continue to monitor 2017 trends.

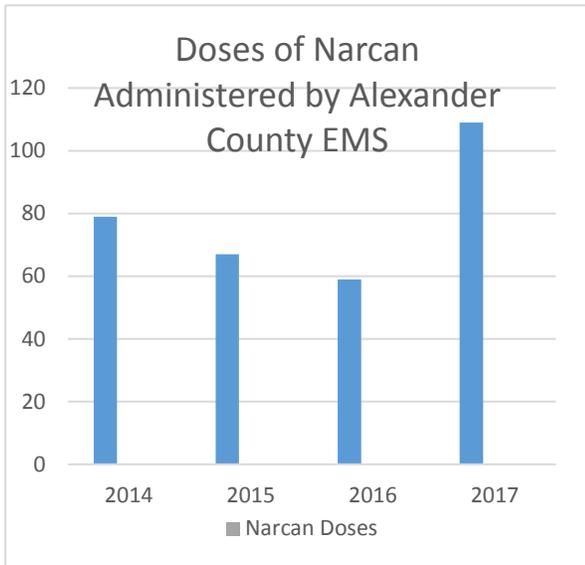


## Substance Abuse

### Narcan Program and Prescription Drug Take Back

In 2014, data from the North Carolina Injury and Violence Prevention Branch showed that 25 opiate overdoses resulted in emergency department visits, 17 of which required hospitalizations of Alexander County residents. Only one was due to a non-prescription opiate overdose. In 2015, there were six prescription opiate overdose deaths in Alexander County. Alexander County's opiate poisoning deaths per 100,000 residents is 12.4, which is higher than the state rate of 10.3. (NCIOM)

In conjunction with Alexander County EMS, the Alexander County Sheriff's Office, and Project Lazarus, the Health Department continues to take steps to address the increasing prescription drug overdose rate in our community. In 2015, each first response agency in the



County was given the opportunity to participate in a Narcan (Naloxone Hydrochloride) program designed to increase survival rates for individuals suffering from opioid overdoses. Seven local fire departments accepted the invitation to participate and were trained and supplied with this life-saving drug designed to block or reverse the effects of opioid medication.



Example of an intranasal Naloxone kit provided for first responder use

Narcan was administered 109 times by Alexander County EMS in 2017. This is a dramatic increase from 59 times in 2016. The Sheriff's Office administered one dose. Taylorsville Police Department has administered Narcan 6

times in 2017.

The permanent prescription drug take-box located inside the Alexander County Law Enforcement Center continues to be an effective tool to safely dispose of unused, unwanted or expired medications from homes throughout our community. In 2017, approximately 437 pounds of medications were collected in the box and destroyed in a safe and secure manner. Agencies will continue to promote the use of the program in 2017 in an effort to reduce incidences of opioid overdose in Alexander County.

Other efforts include:

- The Alexander County Health Department will continue to educate the community on the safe storage and disposal of prescription medications, with a special emphasis on prescription opiates.
- In the 2016 SOTCH, the Health Department stated plans for placing a drop-box outside of the facility. However, in 2017 it was found that regulatory barriers make it unmanageable because of state laws. The drop-box has been purchased and the Health Department will pursue alternative placement in the community in 2018.
- Substance abuse classes were also added to the 9<sup>th</sup>-grade curriculum at Alexander Central High School in 2017.

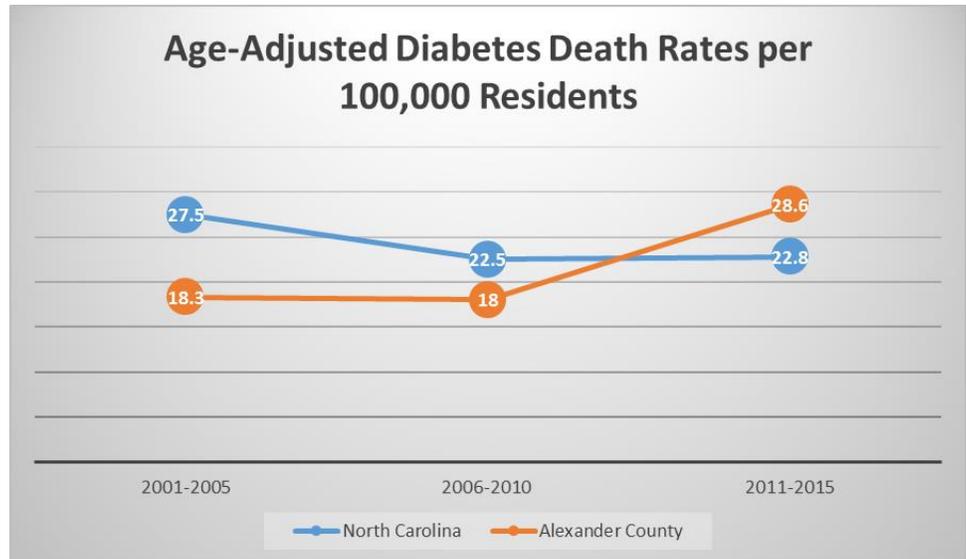
The North Carolina Harm Reduction Council, in response to changes in legislation and state policy, has begun working with Olive Branch Ministry, which is a mobile syringe exchange program established in neighboring Catawba County. Olive Branch Ministry operates needle exchanges in Alexander County.

Alexander County also has a new Addiction Recovery Medical Services Center. Dr. Bobby Kearney recently opened a new office in Taylorsville to help resident's combat addiction through medical and mental health services. Dr. Kearney's office offers in-house counseling to patients and their families.

# Emerging Issues

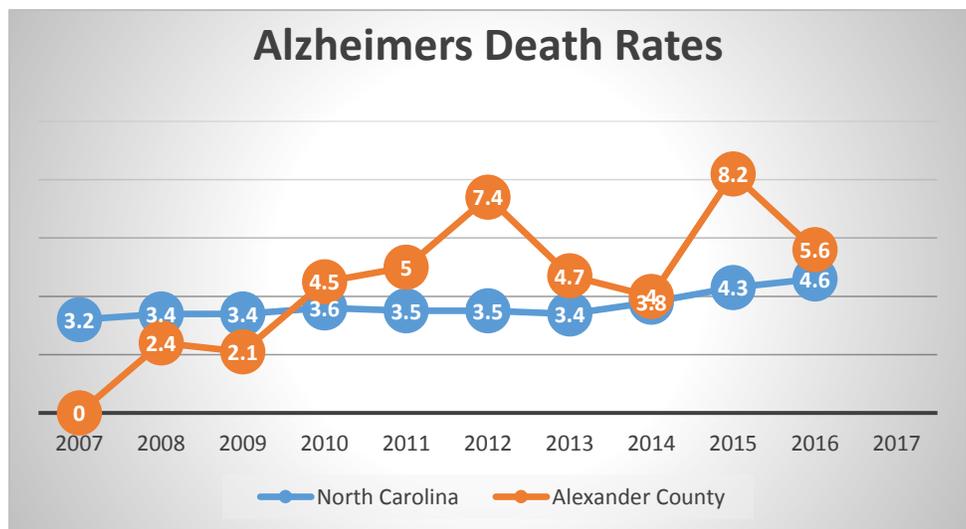
## Diabetes

For over a decade diabetes has been in the top ten causes of death in Alexander County. However, diabetes death rate has now soared past the state average. The risk factors for developing diabetes is a combination of lifestyle choices and genetics. In 2016, an estimated 34% of the population in Alexander County was considered obese (BMI 30 or greater). Family history, age, or ethnicity cannot be changed but diet, physical activity, and weight can. The Health Department has begun exploration of intervention to combat the increasing diabetes rate in Alexander County. The department also continues to work with other local agencies to address the reduction of obesity through healthy lifestyle changes.



## Alzheimer's Disease

Noted in the 2014 CHA, the deaths associated with Alzheimer's disease has shown an overall upward trend since 2007. Deaths related to Alzheimer's disease saw a significant spike in 2015 before dropping again in 2016. However, the overall rate has remained higher than North Carolina's average since 2010. The cause of Alzheimer's is currently unknown, although there has been proof of genetic links. There is also no cure. Alexander County residents prefer to age-in-place, and the county has become a retirement community in recent years. Currently, there are no support groups for caregivers. ACHD will continue to monitor this trend and evaluate possible interventions. Unfortunately, there are currently no intervention options. This will remain a constant with this aging demographic.



# Access to Care

## Progress Made

In the past year, the Alexander County Health Department has hired a new Family Nurse Practitioner. She works 32 hours per week providing primary care. ACHD began offering primary care services in September 2017. Since then the department has seen 182 insured and 140 self-pay clients. Out of the 140 self-pay patients, 124 fell into the lowest pay category for that program which is 40%. Iredell Health Systems recently purchased Family Care Center, a large, local medical practice. Resulting in Iredell Health Systems being much more involved in the community. Family Care Center has also hired a new physician, Dr. Jonathan Goodnight. Dr. Goodnight is also acting co-Medical Director of the Health Department. The Alexander County Health Department has collaborated with more local area hospitals to provide more delivery options to pregnant clients. The clients can now choose from three options, Iredell Memorial Hospital, Davis Regional Medical Center, and Catawba Valley Medical Center, instead of one. A telehealth program will soon be offered at local schools. The system will be ready in March to three pilot schools. School nurses have been trained to work with a provider, located at the Alexander County Health Department, online via a safe and secure computer screen and equipment to see students if needed while at school. This will help with emergent care needs in county schools and help reduce absences.



## Acknowledgements

The Alexander County Health Department's mission is to achieve a healthy community by protecting and promoting Public Health through education, training, and promotion of health services and advocacy. If you have questions regarding the information provided in the report, services, or comments on how to better serve the community, please contact the Health Department at 828-632-9704.

The 2017 SOTCH report is available to the public at the Alexander County Health Department located at 338 1st Avenue South West in Taylorsville. This report will also be available at all Alexander County Library Main Branch, Stony Point Branch, and Bethlehem. In addition, at the Alexander County Administration Office located at 621 Liledoun Road in Taylorsville, and on the website at [AlexanderHealth.org](http://AlexanderHealth.org).

## 2017 Board of Health Membership

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